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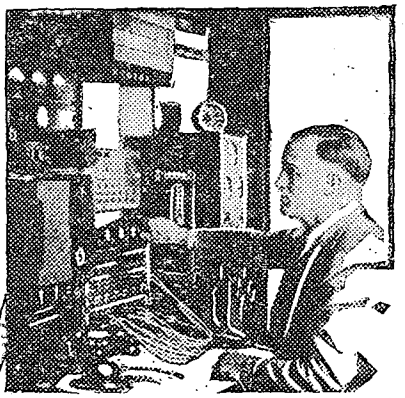

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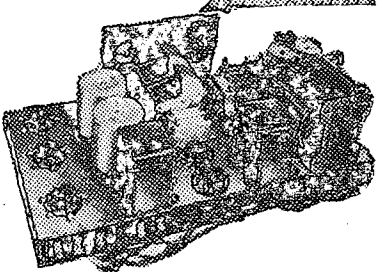

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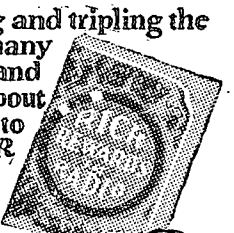

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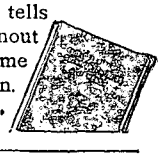

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ARGOSY
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VOLUME 222 SATURDAY, JULY 18, 1931 NUMBER 4

The Turquoise Trail

Irish O'Shea, tanned and smiling cowpuncher, was loyal to the core; and that loyalty turned him into an amateur detective when mystery rode the range

"Dead, eh?" grunted Hastings

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "Bluffer's Luck," "The Trail of Deceit," etc.

CHAPTER I.

SHOT BY MISTAKE.

THE man was lying flat on his back, arms flung wide, his sightless eyes apparently looking at the steely-blue sky. Above him creaked an old windmill, swinging slowly in a vagrant breeze. On the tumbledown fence around the water hole sat a couple of magpies, conversing in almost human voices, as they discussed this person, who they had decided was not merely sleeping.

High above the top of the old windmill, several buzzards circled slowly, their keen eyes studying that thing beside the old mill rig. A flight of blue doves whipped in from over the desert hills, broke quickly and flipped down to get a drink at the bit of water still in the pool.

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Two horsemen appeared on the skyline of a ridge, from where they could look down at the windmill. One of them produced a pair of field glasses, and carefully scanned the windmill and vicinity; after which they rode swiftly down through the mesquite, cut around the head of an arroyo, and came down to the water hole. The magpies scolded them angrily, but flew away while the riders were still out of gunshot. The doves left on whistling wings, and the buzzards moved on to circle farther away.

The two riders were Bedrock Belton, owner of the Seven Cut cattle outfit, and Jud Hastings, his foreman. Bedrock was close to seventy years of age, thin, wiry; a man of rawhide and steel, but with the heart of a saint—though it didn't always show. Hastings was a big man, slow of movement; a first class cattleman, but a slow thinker.

Spry old Bedrock was off his horse before Hastings had made a move to dismount, and was kneeling beside the dead man. Slowly Hastings got down, and came over to him.

The dead man was possibly forty years of age, medium height, with a deeply lined face, hooked nose. He was wearing a faded blue shirt, overalls, an old pair of bat-wing chaps, which had once been of a fancy pattern. On the ground, ten feet away from him, was a shapeless old extra-high-crowned sombrero.

"Dead, eh?" grunted Hastings heavily.

Bedrock nodded sadly. "They hit him twice, Jud; once high in the right shoulder, and once through the left. He didn't have a chance." The old man's face was grave. "I was worried when he didn't come back, Jud."

"You didn't have no idea of this happening, didja, Bedrock?"

"No idea at all. I'd of given the feller a gun if I'd knowed he had enemies around here—even though we didn't know much 'bout him."

"Who the devil do yuh suppose shot him, Bedrock?"

"I can't even suppose. Yuh see, he was kinda like a tramp. Didn't have a dime to his name—and he talked all right when I met him down in Ocotillo City. He said he jist wanted a job. Knowed cows, he said. Gosh, I—I didn't need him, Jud. You know that."

"No, yuh didn't," admitted the foreman.

"He didn't have no clothes—much; so I loaned him some of my old ones—m' chaps and old hat."

"I wasn't there," reminded Hastings.

"I know yuh wasn't, Jud. He wanted to git to work; so I fixed him up with the clothes and a ridin' rig. He knowed how to dab a string on a horse; he shore did. I give him a shovel, told him how to find this place, and—oh, gosh! Mighty tough break for the poor feller."

"Uh-huh," sighed the foreman, and got to his feet. "I reckon I might as well clean out that water hole, while we're here."

"Never mind that, Jud; you go to town and bring Haw Burroughs out here as soon as he can make it. Not that Haw can do much good, but this job needs a sheriff."

"You goin' to stay here?" asked Hastings.

"Shore. I'll watch the buzzards."

THE foreman rode away, and old Bedrock filled his pipe. After a few puffs, he went over and squatted down beside the dead man. Beneath the man's right hip, he saw the

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corner of a leather bill fold, which he pulled out. It was very old, the leather greasy from handling, and contained nothing except a postal card picture of a girl. It was a fairly large, close-up picture of a girl, who might have been about sixteen or seventeen. Her features were not well defined, but the eyes were large.

Below the picture was written in fine pen lines:

Love to Daddy Mine from Della.

And on the back was written an address in Los Angeles. Bedrock's pipe went out as he sat there, holding the picture. Bedrock had never been married; never had any time for women. In fact, all his life he had been just a little afraid of women. After a while he replaced the picture in the old bill fold and put it in his own pocket.

"Ain't that jist the way?" he asked the world. "Los Angeles. Now what did this feller tell me his name was? Oh, yeah—Bradshaw. Jim Bradshaw. I've got to remember that name . . . Well, I reckon there's nothin' more I can do. I better dig that water hole."

He went over and picked up the shovel, where the man had dropped it after being shot. A big splinter had been torn from the handle, and Bedrock guessed a bullet had scored it. He looked down at the old white sombrero, and a puzzled expression crossed his lined old face. Finally he took off his own hat and looked at it. It was a new Stetson, black, and with a much lower crown.

"Huh!" he grunted softly. "And I've been a wearin' that old white hat for—lemme see—about four, five years. Yuh could see it a mile. Well, dog-gone my soul! Hm-m-m-m-m! I jist wonder if somebody wanted to demise me, and made a mistake?

"Well, now, I jist wonder. This feller rode that wagon-wheel gray that I been ridin' quite a lot. Uh-h-h-h-huh! My hat and my old chaps. Packin' a shovel over his shoulder, too. That's me—packin' a shovel. Well, now, that's worth thinkin' about—and keepin' my danged old head down, while I think. Huh!"

Bedrock walked over to his horse, lifted the rifle from his saddle scabbard, and sat down with his back against the windmill rig. A few head of white-faced cattle came drifting down a swale, bawling softly; and behind them rode a cowboy. He spurred in past the cattle, and rode up close to Bedrock.

IT was Irish O'Shea, one of Bedrock's men. Irish was exactly twenty-five years of age, as dark as an Indian, black hair, brown eyes, flashing white teeth. Black Irish, was Irish O'Shea, of medium height, hard as nails; barring none, the best bronc rider in the country.

O'Shea looked well in his range clothes and there were touches, here and there, to show that O'Shea liked shining metals and bright colors. He dropped lightly off his horse, and came over to Bedrock. His eyes flashed to the dead man, shifted back to his boss.

"The man who didn't come back last night, eh?" said Irish softly.

"He had a mighty good reason, too, Irish; two thirty-thirties in him."

"When did yuh find him?"

"Jist a while ago. Me and Jud rode down here. I've sent Jud to Ocotillo City after the sheriff."

Irish removed his hat and wiped his brow. His eyes scanned the surrounding hills, and shifted back to the rifle in Bedrock's lap.

"What's behind it, boss?" he asked.

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"Behind what?"

"You settin' there with a rifle across your lap."

The old man looked at him, and the ghost of a smile flashed across his lips.

"I'm guardin' the body, Irish."

"Oh, yeah," nodded the young cowboy, and sat down beside his boss.

"As a matter of fact, Irish, this man was a total stranger in this range. He's about my size, ridin' that wagon-wheel gray, which I ride—and he was wearin' my old white hat."

Irish spat thoughtfully and rolled a cigarette. Finally he said:

"It might be, Bedrock."

"Can yuh think of a better idea, Irish?"

"It couldn't have been accidental, could it?"

"One bullet—yeah; never three. The third bullet splintered the handle of the shovel. No, Irish, I'm afraid somebody notched their sights intentionally."

"Funny business," sighed the cowboy. "Anybody but you, Bedrock."

"Why anybody but me?"

"You're a square shooter. I don't reckon I've ever heard any man say a word against yuh. Yuh trade square, shoot square, talk square. That's why I can't see any reason for shootin' yuh."

"Thank you, Irish. I try to play a square game. But," the old man's lips tightened for a moment, "somebody ain't playin' square with me."

"What do yuh mean, Bedrock?"

BEDROCK rubbed his hand along his rifle barrel for several moments before he spoke.

"Irish, I've always been a great hand to keep my business to myself. I've took a lot of knocks in my life, but no man ever heard me yelp. I'm gittin' old. No, I am, and you know it. I ain't even told Jud Hastings; but I've been losin' cattle for over a year."

"No!"

"Not a lot of 'em, Irish; jist a steady drain. A few here and a few there. The spring round-up showed it; but I never said a word. When you've been raisin' cattle as long as I have, you'll understand. It don't look possible for me to miss a few head—but I can. I see certain 'marker' cattle. Mebbe they're yearlin's, two-year-olds. I know 'em well; know their marks.

"They stay pretty well on the same range, goin' to a certain water hole. One day they ain't there. Yuh know, I ride pretty much, Irish, and I see things. Mebbe a couple markers gone from here, a couple missin' over at Concha Springs. Riders don't find any dead cattle. There ain't no loboes around here, and the black leg don't hurt me none. When a marker is missin' I don't figure he went away alone.

"Do yuh remember me pointin' out a diamond-marked yearlin' and a white rump two-year-old over at Concha less 'n a month ago?"

"Sure, I remember them two, Bedrock," replied Irish.

"They're gone."

"Come to think of it, I ain't seen 'em since that day."

"Nope—and yuh won't, Irish."

"Well, ain't yuh doin' anythin' about it?"

"Jist watchin' around. Don't say anythin' about it. No chance in the world to git 'em, if they know I know it. I'm jist a danged old fool, I suppose?"

"This shootin' have anythin' to do with it, do yuh suppose?"

"I can't figure any connection, unless this poor devil saw 'em. They

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might have been here, pickin' up a few head, and they thought this feller was me."

"Bedrock, I'll bet that's the answer. But ain't it funny how fate works things out? If this feller hadn't showed up, and if you hadn't been the sort of a person to help out a poor devil—Bedrock, do you realize that if he hadn't showed up, you'd have come over here to dig out that water hole?"

"I was goin' to do that," nodded the old man. "I dunno much about fate, Irish. I'd call it hard luck for him. He wasn't much more than forty; I'm close to seventy, and my life is behind me. There ain't nobody dependin' on me."

"Was anybody dependin' on him?"

Bedrock drew out the bill fold, took out the picture and gave it to Irish. The young cowboy studied the face closely, read the autograph, and handed it back to Bedrock.

"Shore hard luck for her," he said slowly. "You'll have to write her, Bedrock. Pretty girl."

"I guess I'll have to do somethin'," admitted Bedrock. "Yuh see, her father saved my life. He didn't know it, but that's what he done. I dressed him up in my clothes—that damn' old white hat! Yeah, Irish, I reckon I'll have to write that girl. She's shore entitled to somethin'. Was them all Seven Cut cows yuh brought down?"

"There was three, four Triple Triangle."

"Well, I reckon we better do a little work on that water, before Jud gits back with the sheriff."

IT was another hour before Jud came back with Haw Burroughs, the sheriff, and Alkali Poole, the deputy. Haw Burroughs was a slat-like person, slightly stooped, with a thin face, a flaring mustache and a general air of despondency. He had been christened Henry Arthur William, the three initials composed his nickname. Poole had the head and torso of a heavyweight atop stubby legs, which, when encased in bat-wing chaps, gave him a queer ducklike waddle.

The three men rode up to the windmill and dismounted. Poole wrinkled his nose at Irish O'Shea, hitched up his chaps and g r a v e l y considered the corpse, while Haw Burroughs questioned Bedrock.

"The coroner is comin' in a buckboard," said the sheriff.

"Ridin' on a piller," drawled Alkali. "T' me the funniest thing in the world is a doctor with a boil."

"Didn't he doctor you for one, Alkali?" asked Irish.

"That's what makes it so damn' funny; he said mine didn't hurt."

A few minutes later the coroner came bouncing along over an old unused road, his face set in grim lines. Doctor Shelley's disposition was naturally crabby, worse to-day than usual. He groaned as he made a cursory examination.

"Dead," he declared. "Been dead quite a while."

"That's what studyin' medicine does for yuh," said Alkali seriously. "After four years of it, yuh know as much as a buzzard, except yuh can't see it as far as they can."

Doc Shelley glared at Alkali, but said nothing. They loaded the body into the buckboard, and the five riders trailed the vehicle to Ocotillo City.

Ocotillo City was the county seat of an unfortunately isolated, little-populated county. The nearest railroad was twenty miles to the northwest, at the town of Kennard. A stage line ran from Kennard, through Ocotillo City

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and south to Rosita, twenty miles from Ocotillo City.

As far as paint was concerned, Ocotillo City did not assay one trace. Architecturally speaking, it was all out of line. Both sides of the main street were lined with frame buildings, many of them false-fronted, none of them in line with any other. Wooden sidewalks sagged, the cross boards xylophone-like under the heavy tread of high-heel boots. Hitch racks lined the streets. Civic pride in Ocotillo City was on a par with the signs—faded badly.

One of the prominent attorneys was Edward Duvall, a nephew of Bedrock Belton. A brother, Peter Duvall, together with Edward owned the Triple Triangle outfit three miles north of the town. Bedrock had nothing in common with these two men. Their father had been a Mississippi River gambler, whom Bedrock detested.

They had only been in Ocotillo City two years, coming there from Texas. They bought out the Forked S outfit, and changed it to the Triple Triangle, which Pete operated. Ed had proved himself to be a clever lawyer, and was being groomed for the next prosecuting attorney election. Pete had aroused Bedrock's anger when he made the remark that he was changing the Forked S to a Triple Triangle, because he wanted a brand that no one could alter.

Pete's brand consisted of three triangles in a row, with the first and third pointing upward, and the middle one pointing down. He was right in saying that no one could alter that brand, since all the other ranches used much simpler marks, such as the Square Bar and the Hourglass. The Seven Cut outfit used a figure seven, followed by an upright mark slanting toward the right.

Bedrock had retorted to Pete that the cattlemen of the Ocotillo range were not in the habit of altering brands.

"I'd rather be safe than sorry," Pete had replied, laughing.

THE arrival of the murdered man created quite a stir in town. No one knew him; a few knew he had come in from Kennard, and some knew he had taken a job at the Seven Cut.

Ed Duvall came down to the coroner's office with Parke Baker, the prosecutor. Ed Duvall was tall, swarthy, well dressed, about thirty-five years of age.

Baker questioned Bedrock about the dead man, and the old cattleman told him what he knew—which was too little to be of any real value. Duvall listened to the conversation. Bedrock did not mention the fact that he believed some one had killed Bradshaw by mistake.

After the conversation with the prosecutor, Bedrock drew Duvall aside.

"Let's walk up to yore office, Ed," he suggested. "I've got somethin' I want yuh to do for me."

"Be mighty glad to do anything for you," agreed Ed heartily.

They sat down in the office.

"I've been intendin' to have this done for a long time," said Bedrock slowly. "I'm gittin' old, Ed. Mebbe I'm jist beginnin' to realize it. I want yuh to write out a will for me."

"Why, sure."

The lawyer reached for a sheet of paper, and picked up a pencil.

"How do yuh start a thing like that, Ed?" asked Bedrock.

"That part isn't important. I will word it in a legal way. You merely

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tell me what bequests you wish to make."

"What was that word, Ed?"

"Bequests?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, that means, to whom do you wish to bequeath your property."

"Uh-huh. You mean, who am I givin' it to, eh?"

"That's right. You give me all the names, and the different pieces of property you want them to have."

"It's all in one piece, Ed; I don't want it split, yuh see."

"All right. You wish to give everything you own to one person?"

"That's right; everythin' I own."

"All right. Now, who gets this in the event of your death?"

Bedrock drew out the old bill fold, took out the postcard picture, and squinted at the back of it.

"Della Bradshaw," he said slowly. "Her address is 1718 Pima Street, Los Angeles, Californy."

Bedrock lifted his eyes and saw the lawyer staring at him queerly.

"Write it down," he said, as he put the bill fold in his pocket.

"Why—uh—isn't that the name of the dead man—Bradshaw?" asked Ed Duvall.

"Yeah."

"And you—you are giving his daughter everything you own?"

"Yeah, that's the idea, Ed."

"I don't understand it," said Ed. "You say you didn't know Bradshaw, and you— What's the idea?"

"Her father done me a heck of a big favor, Ed," replied Bedrock slowly. "I reckon there ain't no better way to pay it back than to do somethin' nice for his daughter."

"Do you know this girl?"

"Nope."

"You didn't know Bradshaw?"

"Nope."

Ed Duvall sagged back in his chair and scowled at Bedrock.

"My dear uncle, are you in your right mind?" he asked sharply.

"I don't reckon there's anythin' the matter with my mind, Ed. If yuh don't want to write this here will, jist say so."

"Oh, I'll write it. I'm merely trying to protect your interests. It seemed mighty queer, that was all. You say Bradshaw did you a big favor?"

"Jist a heck of a big favor, Ed."

"What was that?"

The old cattleman smiled slowly, squinting out through a dusty window at the sun-drenched street.

"He wore my old white sombrero, Ed."

And while the lawyer stared at him, possibly wondering if the old man had lost his mind, Bedrock got to his feet and began filling his pipe.

"How long will it take yuh to make it out, Ed?" he asked.

The lawyer hesitated for several moments.

"Not very long," he said. "Are you in a hurry for it?"

"Can I sign her to-morrow, Ed?"

"Why, yes, I can have it ready by that time."

"Good. You fix her up and I'll sign it to-morrow afternoon. I've been aimin' to have some work done on my teeth. Kinda botherin' me a little. Mebbe I'll run outside and see one of them dentists that do painless work. I'm sort of a dang coward about havin' somebody hammer on my teeth."

"Where will you go?" asked the lawyer.

Bedrock sauntered over to the door and turned the knob.

"I've allus kinda hankered to see more water than a horse could drink,"

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he replied thoughtfully. "I ain't never seen no ocean. They say there's an ocean down near Los Angeles somewheres"

CHAPTER II.

HUNGER.

DELLA BRADSHAW got off a car on Santa Monica Boulevard and walked north along the palm-bordered Pima Street. It was about nine o'clock in the morning, and she should have been home by midnight the night before. She seemed utterly weary; her face was actually dirty, and her blue skirt had a hole in it big enough to drop an apple through. A close inspection would show that it had been burned. There were several burned places on one sleeve of her waist.

The number 1718 was on the front of a second-class apartment house; some struggling architect's idea of a mission effect. Della mounted the few steps and entered the place. Mrs. Cook, the landlady, gave her an appraising glance, lifted her eyebrows slightly, but said nothing, as Della mounted the stairs. No one ever went out or into that apartment house and escaped the eagle eye of Mrs. Cook. She ran a respectable place and made her own beer in the basement.

Della had been out all night, and Mrs. Cook knew it. But Della was too weary to care what Mrs. Cook thought. She opened the door of her apartment, and a voice yelled from the kitchenette:

"Saints alive—is that you, Dell?"

"Yes," replied Della.

"Be out in just a moment. I've been trying for ten minutes to whip some cream. Three rounds for me, three for the cream, and three even. If I ever land—"

Crash!

"Well, I've got it on the floor! One, two, three, four—it can't get up! Eight, nine, ten—you're out!"

The kitchenette door flew open, and a very red-faced young lady, clad in green pyjamas, came out, carrying a dripping egg beater. She was Jane Gibson, Della's chum and co-partner in the apartment. She brushed back her hair and stared at Della.

"Lova Mike, what's wrong with you?" she asked breathlessly. "Look at your face—and that dress!"

"Is it that bad?" asked Della.

"Worse. Honest, I've almost had the police hunting for you. Called you up after midnight, but couldn't even get the number."

Della sank down in a chair and her shoulders drooped wearily.

"I guess you couldn't, Jane. About that time the Fiji Hut was burning down."

"Burning down? Lova Mike, is that joint burned out?"

"Out and down," sighed Della. "Went up like a stack of hay. And a big, strong man, with an idea of saving the women and children first, knocked me down and ran over me. Along came part of the roof, and landed in my lap.

"I was pinned down and kicking with both feet, when an old man dug me out, put out my fires—and here I am. The fire spread to an old warehouse, and I guess all the apparatus in the country was down there. It blocked traffic on the car lines; so we couldn't get home."

"Well, you unlucky devil!" gasped Jane. "Out of a job again."

Della nodded slowly. "And after I'd chased ads for a month. Three

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days' work in a fried chicken hut—and I'll be lucky to ever get that three days' pay."

"You sure have all the bad luck!" said Jane consolingly. "But what's the use of wailing? Wash your face and we'll eat breakfast. I wanted whipped cream with strawberries for breakfast, but the cream is all spilled."

"Haven't we any eggs, Jane?"

"At a nickel apiece?"

"I guess that fire affected my memory of prices," sighed Della. "I wonder if this skirt can ever be fixed."

Jane looked her over critically.

"I'll tell you what we can do, Dell; we can cut a chunk out of the back and fix the front. All you'll have to do is stuff your ears with cotton; so you can't hear what folks say behind your back. Aw, come on and let's eat raw bran and milk. It's good for you."

"Good for calves," said Della, and started for the bathroom.

"Calves? That's a new wrinkle, Dell. Does it make 'em larger or smaller?"

"Larger," replied Della from the bathroom.

"And me on a diet! No bran for mine, sister."

JANE started for the kitchenette, but a soft knock on the door caused her to turn quickly and cross the room. She opened the door and looked curiously at old Bedrock Belton, standing there, hat in hand.

"Oh, how do you do!" she said with a smile.

"Howdy!" he said seriously. He shifted his feet and changed his hat to the other hand.

"The lady downstairs said that a Miss Bradshaw lived here."

"Why, yes, she lives here. Won't you come in?"

"Yes'm, I reckon I might."

He looked curiously around the room.

"Funny, ain't it?" he said.

"Well, it's rather plain," replied Jane. "I never was able to see anything funny about it."

Bedrock grinned slowly. "I—I wasn't speakin' of the place. Yuh see, all I had was the number and the street. I meant it was funny, how yuh imagine it's goin' to look, and then yuh see it and it don't look that way a-tall."

"Oh, I see, you had the number and the street."

"Uh-huh. You ain't Miss Bradshaw, are yuh?"

"No; I'm Miss Gibson."

"Pleased to meetcha, Miss Gibson. I'm Bedrock Belton."

She shook hands solemnly with the old man, wondering what in the world he wanted of Della Bradshaw. And at that moment Della came from the bathroom. She stopped short and looked at him.

"This is Miss Bradshaw," said Jane. "Did you say your name was Belden?"

"Belton, ma'am."

"Well, my goodness!" exclaimed Dell. "You are the man who helped me out at the fire last night!"

"Dog-gone!" snorted Bedrock. "I thought I'd seen yuh somewhere. How are yuh this morning, ma'am?"

Dell shook hands with him, making a swift appraisal of him, as she did so. Wrinkled suit of "store clothes," high-heeled boots, Stetson hat. No vest, no suspenders; a colored sash around his waist.

"So you're Della Bradshaw, eh?" he said.

"Yes, I am Della Bradshaw; but I've never met you—until last night. Did somebody tell you who I was and where I lived?"

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"I dunno; I didn't ask. Them there firemen chased me out, and I didn't see no more of yuh, ma'am."

"But how on earth did you ever know where I lived?"

"Well, I had yore address, and—"

"Who gave you my address, Mr. Belton?"

Bedrock Belton realized that he had certain things to tell her, and he didn't know where to start.

"Yuh better set down," he said huskily. "I've got somethin' to tell yuh—somethin' pretty bad, ma'am."

"Pretty bad?" asked Della. "I don't understand what you mean."

"Yore dad's name was Jim Bradshaw, wasn't it?"

"Has something happened to him?" she asked quickly.

"He's dead and buried," whispered Bedrock, as though a whisper would sort of take the curse off the statement.

Della sank down in a chair, staring at the old man. Jane leaned against the wall and gave vent to a soft whistle of astonishment.

"You—you don't mean that!" said Della chokingly.

"I wish I didn't," sighed Bedrock. "Yuh jist set there and let me tell yuh about how it happened."

BEDROCK explained how Jim Bradshaw came to Ocotillo City, broke; and begged him for a job. Della listened in stony silence, until the old cattleman had finished telling of the coroner's inquest and of the funeral. He had paid all expenses.

"I haven't seen dad for over a year," said Della wearily. "He came here for a few days. Dad couldn't live in a city. When mother died five years ago, he—he had to get back to the country. We used to have a little ranch up in Oregon; but mother wanted to live in a city. After she died, I lived with an aunt, until I finished school and went to work. Poor dad, he never had any luck! None of us ever did, as far as that goes."

Della's eyes were wet with unshed tears, but her lips did not quiver. Old Bedrock looked at her approvingly. He realized that she was hurt inside, but too game to show it outwardly.

"Have you got a job now?" he asked.

Della shook her head. "No, I haven't. My job burned up last night. I was a waitress in the Fiji Hut."

"Yeah? Gee, that was tough. What 'll yuh do now?"

"Heaven only knows. Jobs are as scarce as hen's teeth."

Bedrock squinted thoughtfully at her.

"It ain't none of my business, but how are yuh fixed for money?"

Della laughed shortly. "Oh, I'll get along all right, I guess."

"I ain't offerin' charity," said Bedrock stiffly. "I owe somethin' to yore father, don't I?"

"You gave him a job, when you didn't need men. You couldn't have paid wages enough to hire any man, if he knew some one was going to kill him. And, anyway, you don't owe me anything, just because I'm his daughter."

The old man's eyes twinkled, as he looked at her.

"Dog-gone me, if I don't like you!" he said heartily. "Listen to me, Della Bradshaw; I'm old enough to be yore gran'pappy. I ain't no city man, and I don't sabe women a-tall. I seen a play in a' opry house in Denver wunst. It was a city play, and in that play a man told a girl about her father dyin'; and she jist up and whooped and fell flat on her back.

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"I never thought about that, until this mornin', and I was shore scared. That's why I asked yuh to set down and let me tell yuh what happened. I was all set for the whoop and the fall. But there ain't no whoop and no fall; and yuh set right there and git jist as independent as a hawg on ice."

Jane laughed softly. "That's an expression I love," she said. "As independent as a hog on ice. That's Della."

"I guess that's why I'm out of work so often," sighed Della.

Bedrock fumbled for his pipe, thought better of it, and rubbed the palms of his hands on his knees.

"Well," he said slowly, "I ain't goin' to bother yuh two ladies no longer. I'm goin' down and look at the ocean agin t'day. Yuh see, it's a devil of a lot of water to an Arizonan."

"It's a devil of a lot of water even to a fish," said Jane solemnly, and Bedrock threw back his head in a hearty laugh. He got to his feet and picked up his hat.

"Won't we see you again?" asked Della anxiously. "I don't feel that we have treated you right, after what you did—coming clear over here to tell me."

Bedrock fingered his hat thoughtfully.

"Yuh do any cookin' here?" he asked curiously.

"A little," smiled Jane.

"I was jist a wonderin'," he said. "Yuh see, I ain't had nothin' good to eat since I left home. I can't eat, with them waiters hangin' around me, fillin' up my water glass all the time. I tell yuh, I've drank a gallon of water to a meal, keepin' from hurtin' their feelin's. Yes sir, they jist water-log me; bog me down with the stuff . . . I was a wonderin'—suppose I bring some big steaks and a lot of beans and some honest-to-Gawd spuds—"

"And onions," added Della.

"Shore—big white ones. Whoa, Blaze! I'll git me back here about four o'clock with everythin' we need, even if I have to hire me a pack mule."

AND before either of the girls could say another word, the old man was clattering heavily down the stairs. Della and Jane sat down and looked at each other.

"Della," said Jane softly, "I know how you feel. I lost my father three years ago."

Della nodded and a tear trickled down her cheek.

"It's fate," she said. "He died in the country he loved best of all. Why should we cry over something that must come to all of us? There was no suffering. It—it just leaves me alone, Jane."

"I know. But you'd have been alone, anyway."

"I suppose that is true. When he was here the last time, he said he wanted to own a little ranch again, and have me with him."

"You wouldn't want to live on a ranch, Della."

"Wouldn't I?" Della leaned back in her chair wearily. "It's in my blood the same as it was in Dad. Well," Della got to her feet and looked around, "where's the morning paper, Jane? I might as well start reading want ads again."

Bedrock Belton was as good as his word, and at exactly four o'clock, staggering under a load of meat and groceries, he came to the little apartment.

"Dog-goned if I can see how anybody could cook in a kitchen as small as this," he declared. "You ort to see

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the kitchen at the Seven C[illegible] ranch. This place ain't big enou[illegible] to cuss a cat in."

He drew a chair up near the doorway, and watched the girls prepare the meal.

"I suppose you have a wonderful cook at your ranch," said Della.

"Most profane man I ever knowed —'Doughgod' Smith. Don't even have to use sody in his biscuits. Jist stands back and cusses 'em until they raise in self-defense."

"I'd love to hear him," laughed Della.

"He's a dinger," grinned Bedrock. "I've got a great gang. Jud Hastings, Irish O'Shea, 'Pastry' Cook, Dud Evers, Pecos Thompson and Doughgod. That's all I have reg'lar. Tough as whang-leather, the whole bunch. Jud's my foreman, but I think Irish is my favorite. You girls would like Irish. He's a fancy bronc rider, and he shore can sing pretty. Plays a guitar along with his songs. Pecos can sing pretty good, too."

"I suppose Irish has lots of girls," said Jane.

"No, he ain't—not a danged one. He sings his love songs to cow-punchers, cows or horses. But he ain't particular; I've heard him singin' to a burro."

"What is a burro?" asked Jane.

"Well, ma'am, a burro is somethin' that couldn't be a horse, and wouldn't be a mule; and it spends yore sleepin' hours tellin' the wide world that it's unhappy."

Both girls were capable cooks, and the meal was a joy to the old cowman. He regaled the girls with anecdotes of the range, helped them wash the dishes; and it was nine o'clock before he realized the time. No nighthawk was Bedrock Belton, even on his vacation.

"Well, I'll be moseyin' on to bed," he told them. "I suppose you have to get up early."

"Seven o'clock for me," smiled Jane.

"What is your job?" asked Bedrock.

"I'm a pot-hook maker in a broker's office down town."

Bedrock nodded, although he had no idea what sort of a job that might be.

"We will see you again, won't we?" asked Della.

"You shore will. I won't be goin' home for a week."

"Our telephone number is Granite 7766."

Bedrock smiled, but shook his head. "I never had any luck with one of them things. I reckon I talk into the wrong part. I'll be seein' you again soon."

HE went clumping down the stairs, and the girls sat down to talk things over. They had both enjoyed the old man. He was so natural, so human and likeable. It was about eleven o'clock and they were getting ready for bed when some one knocked heavily on their door.

There were two men, serious-faced, who glanced quickly around the little living room of the apartment. Jane had answered the knock.

"Are you Della Bradshaw?" asked one of the men. Della stepped into the room, and Jane indicated her.

"We're from the police department," said one of them. "Are you acquainted with a man named Amos Belton?"

"We know a man named Belton," said Della, wondering why the police were inquiring about him.

"He left here about nine o'clock," said Jane.

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"Old man, wearing cowboy boots?"

"Yes. What has happened to him—anything?"

"Do you know where he's from?" asked one of the men.

"Some place in Arizona," said Jane quickly.

"Ocotillo City," added Della.

"That's the man."

"But what is this all about?" asked Della anxiously.

"Miss Bradshaw, this old man, Amos Belton, was shot and killed about two blocks from here, a little after nine to-night."

"Oh, my heavens!" exclaimed Della. "You don't mean that!"

"I'm sorry, but it's true. Apparently it was a hold-up. Luckily an officer was less than a block away, and heard the shot. He says the murderer was apparently going through the dead man's pockets. He yelled at the killer to hold up his hands. As a result, the officer is in the hospital with a bullet in his leg, and the murderer got away."

"And the old man was dead?" asked Della painfully.

"Yes, he was dead. Was he any relation to you, Miss Bradshaw?"

"Not at all. Why, I never saw him before in my life, until this morning!"

The two officers looked curiously at each other.

"Not until this morning, eh?"

"He came," said Della softly, "to tell me that my father was killed over in Arizona. He was working for Mr. Belton."

"Oh, is that so? Uh-huh, I see. Well, Miss Bradshaw, would you mind riding up to the station with us? We'll bring you back, I'm sure. You see, we want to talk over things."

"Why, what is there to talk over?" asked Della. "I'm not under arrest, am I?"

"Certainly not; merely to explain a few things. You see, there was about five hundred dollars in currency on the old man, and a will, dated to-day, in which you are his sole beneficiary."

Della stared blankly at them.

"A—a will?" she stammered.

"Something about a big cattle ranch in Arizona," explained one of the men.

"Why, I can't imagine such a thing!"

"No, I don't honestly believe you can," smiled one of the men. "But get on your coat and hat, and we'll all talk it over."

CHAPTER III.

TWO TELEGRAMS.

IRISH O'SHEA had often thought of what Bedrock had told him about the missing cattle; and one day, a week or so after Bedrock had gone to Los Angeles, Irish rode over to the old water hole, where Bradshaw had been killed. There had been no rain for months.

Irish sat down at the windmill and reconstructed things as he had seen them that day. He wanted to see if he could locate the spot where the murderer had hidden to fire the shots, but it was rather a difficult thing to do, because he did not know whether Bradshaw had been shot off his horse or not.

The ground around the windmill was so hard that there had been no marks to show. If Bradshaw had been shot off his horse, and had fallen with his feet toward the west, there was no reason to believe that the shot had come from the west. The horse might have turned completely around before Bradshaw fell off.

But Irish picked out a big manzanita bush about a hundred and fifty yards

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away from the windmill, and rode over there. He intended searching a circle of about that distance; but his search ended at the manzanita, where he dismounted and picked up three corroded thirty-thirty shells.

Here the ground was more of a silt formation, which retained tracks and marks of a pair of knees, where the murderer had knelt. Irish studied the imprint of the man's tracks, and whistled softly.

"Moccasins!" he exclaimed softly. "Apaches!".

It had been years since any Apache had molested a white; but it looked very much as though one of them had reverted to type. It would be like one of them to do a piece of deviltry like that, under certain circumstances.

Irish pocketed the empty shells and rode across the hills to Ocotillo City. He was not going to mention this to Burroughs. There would be no way of identifying the Indian, even if they did round up every Apache in the State. Irish decided that Bedrock's theory of a mistake was all wrong. A passing Indian, possibly with an alcoholic hang-over, had seen a chance to avenge some ancient wrong; and had ridden on. Irish was glad to know what he did about it, because he felt that Bedrock would be in no danger, such as he would be if his own theory had been right—that cattle thieves and outlaws were working thereabouts.

Irish cut across the hills and struck the road, which ran due south to Ocotillo City, and was lazying along when the stage from Kennard overtook him, bowling along in a cloud of dust. Irish reined out of the road and let it pass. On the seat with the driver was Ed Duvall, and they both waved at Irish as they passed.

He jogged on into town and tied his horse at the Crescent Saloon hitch rack. He noticed two of the Seven Cut horses at the rack, and in the saloon he found Pastry Cook and Pecos Thompson. Pecos was singing mournfully, while Pastry leaned on the bar, holding his face in his hands. There was no denying the fact that both of them were very near to being drunk.

Irish listened to Pecos's song, before intruding.

"Oh, hello, Irish!" grunted Pecos. "Welcome, brother."

"Don't mention it," grinned Irish. "How come you rannies ain't workin'? Think this is Sunday?"

"Noshir." Pecos shook his head so hard that he lost his hat. "It's a shad tale, Irish. Yuh shee Pas'ry there? I come with him to shee a doctor. He was sick, don'tcha know it?"

"He does look kinda sick," admitted Irish.

"Oh, he ain't so sick now. The doctor shed he had illustrated tooth; so he forceps tooth out. Yuh could hear Pastry yell for miles. Oh, it was worth a lot to hear 'm yell!"

"You'd yell," said Pastry painfully. "You'd yell worse'n I did, you bat-eared rannahan; that's what you'd do."

"I'll betcha I'd be s t o i c a l like Injun," declared Pecos. "I can stand anythin'—anythin', I tell yuh."

"But that don't explain why yo're both drunk," said Irish.

"Who's drunk?" demanded Pecos owlishly. "I deman' to know?"

"The King of Ireland," grinned Irish.

"Thasso? It was like thish, Irish," explained Pecos. "We got our illustrated tooth out, and it hurt us awful; so we had to have a drink. The barten'er shed to hol' whisky in our mouth and it might take away the pain. Now,

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tha's what we've been tryin' to do for an hour. Can't be done, I tell yuh—it slips."

"It takes practice," grinned the bartender. "Have another. Step up and have a snifter, Irish."

"Jist which one of you fellers had the bad tooth?" asked Irish, after the drink.

Pastry and Pecos looked foolishly at each other. Finally Pastry explored his cavernous mouth with his forefinger.

"Igul feegul hole har'," he said, with the finger nearly all inside his mouth.

"I reckon it was Pastry," said Irish.

"Yuk," said Pastry. "I've got one missin'."

THE stage driver, Gunther, came in and walked up to the bar.

"Jud Hastings in town?" he asked Irish.

"He didn't come in with you fellers, did he?" asked Irish, and Pecos shook his head.

"I've got a telegram here," informed the driver. "I reckon you can take it. It's jist sent to the Seven Cut Ranch."

Irish took it and read the address.

"Might be from Bedrock," he said. "Still, he'd send it to Jud. Funny thing, sendin' a telegram to a ranch."

"Why don'tcha open it?" asked the driver. "Can't be important, sendin' it to a ranch thataway. It come to Kennard yes'day mornin' too late to catch the stage over here; so it's twenty-four hours old anyway."

Irish slit the envelope and removed the sheet of yellow paper. Swiftly he scanned the message and his lips drew tightly together. Then he stepped in and leaned on the bar, taking a deep breath.

"Boys," he said slowly, "Bedrock Belton is dead."

"Why—why that ain't possible!" said Pecos in a thin voice.

"Dead!" queried Pastry. The statement had sobered him, and he grabbed for the telegram. "You ain't jokin', Irish?"

"Read it for yourself," said Irish, and turned away. The message was from the police department of Los Angeles, and read:

MAN IDENTIFIED AS AMOS BELTON KILLED IN ATTEMPTED ROBBERY HERE LAST NIGHT STOP WIRE AT ONCE AND ADVISE US WHAT STEPS TO TAKE IN DISPOSING OF THE REMAINS.

"Gawd, that's a cold thing to say!" snorted Pecos. "Here's yore meat—do yuh want it on a platter or a plate."

"They can't help it; they don't know him," said Irish.

"That's right. What 'll we do, Irish?"

"Ride back to the ranch and tell Jud, I suppose. Poor old Bedrock; Fought Injuns, outlaws, stampedin' cattle; everythin' that a cowman has to fight—and then gits killed in a city by some damn' pickpocket."

The three cowboys rode out to the Seven Cut, bringing the bad news to the rest of the outfit. Old Bedrock had been a sort of father to all his men. Doughgod Smith, erstwhile tough cowboy, now a crusty, crabbed old cook, sat down and cried, with his lips shut tightly.

Jud Hastings took the news coldly, but was as much affected as any of the rest. He went into the house and put on his best suit.

"You ride with me to Kennard, Irish," he said, "and bring my horse back. I'm goin' to Los Angeles and

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bring Bedrock back with me. I'll send a telegram to the police from Kennard. You'll be in charge until I git back. I'll wire yuh from Los Angeles, and let you know when I'll be back."

"All right," said Irish. "You be careful, Jud; it ain't safe for us kinda fellers in a city. All them holdups and pickpockets."

"If they monkey with me, I'll bend a gun over their damn' heads. If they'd git civilized and lynch a few of them gents, the city would be fit for a man to live in. Police, heck! What they need is a marshal. I'll betcha old Wyatt Earp would soon clean 'em up."

LIFE settled back to its old routine at the Seven Cut. It was rather a big outfit, as far as stock was concerned. Bedrock had been a good manager. His bank balance was close to fifty thousand dollars, his cattle worth more than that. At a very conservative estimate, he was worth a hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

It was three days after Jud Hastings had gone to Los Angeles, when Irish O'Shea got a telegram from Jud, which read:

> WILL ARRIVE KENNARD WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON WITH BODY AND GIRL WHO BEDROCK WILLED THE RANCH TO COME OVER WITH BUCKBOARD AND MEET US ON THREE OCLOCK TRAIN.

Irish scratched his head over this telegram. He had forgotten the picture of Della Bradshaw, which Bedrock had showed him. He went over to the Crescent Saloon, where he met Pastry Cook, and showed him the telegram. Of course, Pastry knew nothing at all about Della Bradshaw.

"Do yuh reckon some female took the old man in?" he asked.

"Shore looks like it," said Irish.

Ed Duvall came in, and Irish turned to him.

"Did you know Bedrock had a will?" asked Irish.

"He had me make one," replied Duvall, "but he never came in to sign it."

"Thasso? Huh! Well, he must have made out another. Look at this."

Irish let Duvall read the telegram.

The lawyer shook his head.

"I don't understand it," he said.

Suddenly Irish had an idea.

"By golly, I've got it!" he exclaimed.

"You've got what?" asked Pastry.

"That girl! Bradshaw, the feller who got murdered, had a daughter. Bedrock found her picture in Bradshaw's pocket. I'll betcha he's willed her the ranch. Della Bradshaw. Yessir, I'll betcha."

"That's rather queer," said Duvall thoughtfully. "The will I drew up for him named Della Bradshaw as sole beneficiary. But he never signed it. I'll bet he told her he left *that* will."

"Ain't it no good?" asked Irish.

"Not as it is now. He failed to sign it."

"That might be true," admitted Irish. "Still, Bedrock wasn't a fool. He'd know if the will had been signed or not; and if he didn't sign it, I'll bet he had another one written down in Los Angeles."

"Wouldn't be nothin' to stop him, would there?" asked Pastry.

"Not a thing," smiled Ed Duvall evenly. "We'll get the whole story when Jud Hastings gets back."

"And that's to-morrow," nodded Pastry.

Pete Duvall came in with a couple of his Triple Triangle cowboys, and Ed invited everybody to have a drink. Pete was as unlike Ed as two brothers

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might be. Pete was small, wiry, very thin-faced, and his hair was a faded blond—like dead grass. There were rumors that Pete had traveled with a bad bunch in Texas; but he minded his own business in Ocotillo.

Three of his four regular punchers were from Texas—Ken Laird, Tex Bryan, and Cactus Spears. The fourth, Jack Wolf, was a quarter-breed Piegan from Montana.

Pete wanted to know what news they had about Bedrock's murder; and Irish told him about the telegram.

"Then it sure was old Bedrock," said Pete. "I been hopin' they was mistaken."

"I don't reckon yuh shed many tears over it," smiled Irish.

"No, I didn't shed any tears," growled Pete. "But after it's all said and done, he was my uncle. He didn't like me, and he didn't like Ed. But that's all past now. Mebbe if we'd been friends, he'd have left the Seven Cut to me and Ed. We're the only relatives he's got."

"We don't need the Seven Cut," said Ed Duvall quickly.

"I know we don't need it. Heck, we'd be the last ones on earth he'd ever will the ranch to!"

Irish went down to the sheriff's office, where he found Burroughs. He showed the sheriff the telegram, and as an explanation he told the sheriff about the photograph of Della Bradshaw.

"But, Irish, why would he give the Seven Cut to her?" demanded the sheriff.

"I dunno, Haw. Bedrock was a queer old feller. Did you ever stop to figure that somebody might have mistook her dad for Bedrock?"

The sheriff looked keenly at Irish.

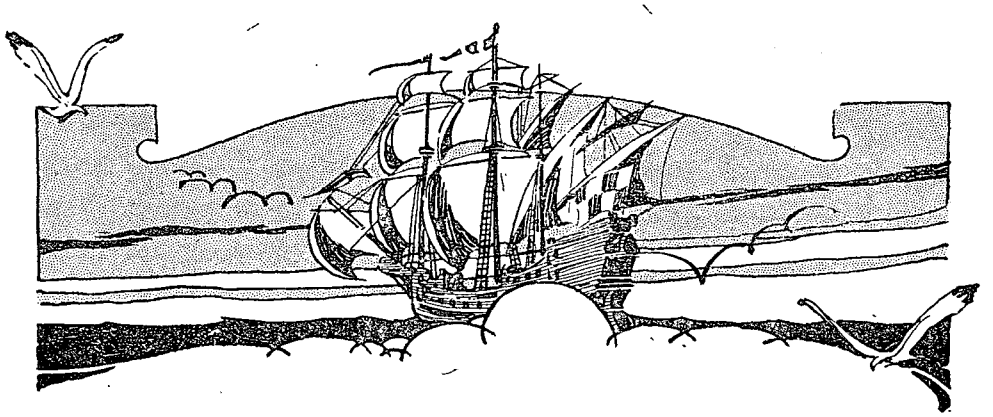
"I never thought of that angle, Irish. How do yuh figure?"

"Her dad wore Bedrock's old white sombrero. Everybody knows that hat. The man rode a gray horse that Bedrock had rode a lot—and yuh know Bedrock packs a shovel quite often."

"Yeah, that's all true, Irish. But who in the devil would try to kill old Bedrock?"

"You figure it out, if yuh can," Irish replied shortly. He did not tell of the three thirty-thirty shells and the moccasin tracks; those were for his own angle in the matter. He did not want the sheriff to take the evidence, sit down on the job and not do anything—which was exactly what Haw Burroughs would have done. Irish had other plans.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.



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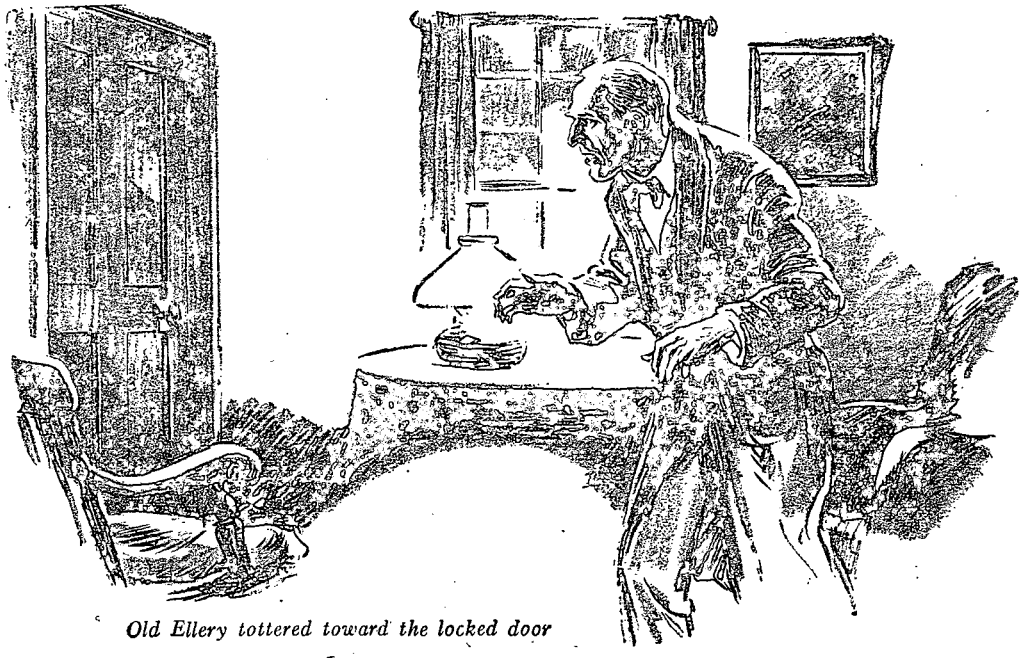

Old Ellery tottered toward the locked door

Borrowed Money

John Carson, rich New Yorker, was amused by the queer mission that took him to the home of his eccentric old New England rival, but he little dreamed of the startling results of that trip

By ELLIS PARKER BUTLER

ONE October morning a man named John Carson got into his car at the door of his Riverside Drive apartment in New York. He had once been cashier of a small bank in the village of Middle Tucker. The car John Carson entered was a resplendent affair with huge glittering hub-caps, its color gray and blue, and its chauffeur was in blue livery. John Carson settled back against the deep cushion of the seat and the chauffeur closed the door.

"Yes, Mr. Carson?" he asked, touching his cap.

"I'll just light up first, Joe," Carson said, and found a cigar in his pocket and lighted it. His cigar lighter was of gold. Through the open window John Carson gave his directions.

"You might go up along the river as far as Poughkeepsie, Joe," he said, "and then work over east and on up." Before Peekskill was reached Carson had finished with his paper and put it aside. He now gave some thought to the errand that was taking him to Middle Tucker.

He was going up there to persuade a man named Ellery Elliott to allow his son Stanton Elliott to marry John Carson's only daughter Grace. That

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old fossil of an Ellery Elliott had put his foot down flat and had refused to let his boy marry Grace—and why do you suppose? John Carson's daughter would have too much money!

"That's the New England of it," John Carson thought; "that's the Ellery Elliott of it; they get that way, the old fossils, walking around in circles in their one-horse towns. They can't see beyond the ends of their own noses, any of them."

Stanton Elliott, old Ellery's son, wanting to do better for himself than stick in a small town bank, had come to New York, just as John Carson himself had come twenty years before, and when he was settled in his job he had telephoned to ask if he could call, and that had led to this falling in love that was making all the trouble. Grace was just out of college, and lovely enough for any one, and while Carson would have been better pleased if she had chosen a man who had more back of him, he liked young Stan and thought he would get ahead in the world sooner or later.

The trouble came when Stan went up to Middle Tucker to show Grace to his father and receive a fatherly blessing. Everything was wrong, it turned out. In the first place, Grace drove her own car, and the car, as she admitted, looked like a million dollars.

"And the next day, father," Grace said, "he said 'No!' He shouted it. He said that if he lived a million years he would not let Stan marry me. He said that if Stan married me he could get out and stay out—he would be no son of his ever again. He said he was not going to have a son of his be a rich woman's parlor pet. He said dreadful things! He shook his fist in my face, father, and said I could not come up there and buy me a husband with my money. And, oh, father, I'm so miserable!"

She was, too. She wept all over the place, mostly on her bed in her own rooms, and would not be comforted. Carson had a serious talk with Stanton Elliott, and he hardly knew whether to hate or like the young fellow for his firm stand against Carson's suggested ways out.

"He's all I've got, sir," Stan said, "and he's sick and lonely up there since mother died, and it would kill him if I went against his wishes. I can't do that, Mr. Carson. I don't believe you understand how he feels about it."

NOW John Carson laughed aloud as an idea came to him.

Joe turned his head inquiringly.

"It's all right, Joe," Carson said. "I just thought of something funny." This new idea was amusing, and Carson turned it in his mind, considering it from various angles. Yes, he would do it.

At East Plains station he got out of the car. He was stiff from the long ride and he stretched his arms and flexed his shoulder muscles. "You'll find some place to put up at here, Joe," he said; and then, because Joe deserved some explanation of this change of plan, "I'm doing a prodigal son act, Joe, and this car won't fit in. I'm going on by train, and if I'm not back here in the morning you wait till I come."

The train came rushing to the station and stopped, and Carson clambered onto the smoker. He sat by a window, looking out at the scene; twenty minutes later he stepped down onto the Middle Tucker platform. He knew his way here and he hurried up the street to the common.

At the far side of the common Car-

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son continued up Chelsea Street one block and turned to the right into Elm Street. The big house on the corner that had been brown was now colonial yellow and looked twice as bulky as before, but Carson's eyes were on the next house. This was where Ellery Elliott still lived.

The house was one of those double houses with a front porch with two sets of steps, and a rail dividing the porch into two halves, and two front doors. Ellery Elliott lived in the part nearer Chelsea Street, and for a while —after he came back from Springfield to work in the Middle Tucker Bank— Carson had lived in the other half.

John Carson and Ellery Elliott had been boys together, and together they went to the Academy. There Ellery had rather outclassed John, standing higher in most of the studies and both boys had thought this was proper, Ellery being an Elliott and John only a Carson.

Ellery, on leaving the Academy, went into the Middle Tucker Bank, but there had been no place for John there, so he found himself a place in a bank in Springfield and married there. Later John returned to Middle Tucker, bringing his wife. By that time Ellery was teller in the bank, but it happened that John Carson had been sent for to be cashier, which put him over Ellery, and in the very beginning, in moving into the other half of the Elm Street house, he quite unconsciously did a thing that Ellery silently resented.

As time passed it became evident to Ellery Elliott that John Carson would not be in the Middle Tucker Bank long. Ellery considered that he had done pretty well and was rather nicely fixed in being teller in the bank, but he saw that John Carson considered the cashiership a poor job and good only as a step to something bigger. When Carson resigned the cashiership and went to New York, he threw aside, as if it had been nothing, the job Elliott had not been able to step into.

The Tenter County *Clarion,* which was a weekly paper, gave John Carson quite a send-off—a full half-column with a portrait cut that cost all of four dollars—and that did not please Ellery much. No one had ever asked him for a photograph to make a cut of.

CARSON reached the Elliott house only to discover that Ellery was not there. He was ill, and was staying with his cousin, Henry Elliott, on his farm at Brentridge. After a long and weary bus ride, Carson reached the farm. The sun had set long before and the afterglow had faded and night had fallen. He saw the farmhouse lights and turned in at the gate. Carson rapped on the kitchen door, for that was where the lights were. Henry Elliott came to the door and Carson remembered him when he saw him, and Henry seemed almost to remember Carson.

"I'm John Carson," Carson said, and Henry said "Why, sure! I thought you looked familiar-like. Come on in. What brings you up here this time of night? Edna, here's John Carson. You remember my wife—she was Edna Blessing—don't you?"

"I certainly do," said Carson, although he could not quite place the woman. "I'm up here to see Ellery; I came all the way up from New York for it, and they said he was here."

"He's in bed now," Edna Elliott said. "They said he was sick, didn't they? He's got an attack of janders. I wouldn't dare wake him up."

"You can't very well get back tonight anyway," Henry said, "unless I

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drive you over to Brentridge. We can put you up, easy enough."

"I don't want to go back till I see him," Carson said. "He's a sort of last chance with me. I'll stay till to-morrow if you'll let me."

"Wouldn't think of anything else," Henry said.

It pleased Carson well enough to stay overnight; it would make it seem more realistic if he did than if he had been able to see Ellery at once. It was nearly nine when Henry's wife showed him the room he was to have. Nine was their bed hour.

At ten the next morning the doctor arrived and Carson had a chat with him, but it was not until after the noon meal that Edna Elliott said that Ellery was getting up. She had told him John was there to see him and Ellery had said he would not see John Carson then or ever. He wanted nothing to do with John Carson or any other Carson.

"He locked his door when I came out," she said, "but I don't know anything that's going to stop you from talking to him through it, if you want to. It's the room at the other end of the hall from the one you had. I'm going out to the garden for awhile."

"I'm not going to hurt him," Carson said, smiling, and she laughed.

"Ellery always has been hard to get along with, ever since I've known anything about him," she said. "Having janders don't make him much better, as far as I can see."

Carson went up to Ellery's room and knocked on the locked door, but Elliott knew the steps he had heard were those of a stranger and he made no sign.

"Ellery!" Carson said. "Ellery, listen to me! I've come up here to see you and I'm going to see you. I've got to see you. Ellery, I'm in trouble. Let me in. Give me just five minutes."

"I won't talk to you," Ellery said. "I won't have anything to do with you or your daughter. I can get along without you. I'm going to."

"Oh, that!" Carson said, as if the fate of Stan and Grace meant nothing to him. "That's not what I want to talk about. Ellery, I'm up against it; I'm in a fix where I've got to ask you for money. I've got to ask you to lend me some."

He heard Ellery move in his chair. He must have turned toward the door.

"You want to borrow money from me?" Ellery asked.

"Don't I tell you so?" demanded Carson. "Open this door, won't you? I've got to get back to New York to-night, and I've got to have some money. I've got to have it from you."

HE heard Ellery get out of his chair and move slowly to the door, and he heard the key turn. When he opened the door Ellery's hand was on the knob. The man did look sick; he was a ghastly color—almost lemon-green.

"Come in, John," Ellery said, moving back to his chair. "I'm a sick man. What's this you say? You need to borrow money—you, the great millionaire? The great New York millionaire wants to borrow money from me?"

"That's what I said," Carson answered. "I don't have to tell you what playing the market is. There are ups and downs. I've made a lot of money, one time and another, since I quit business and became an operator; I've spent a lot, too. But the best of us guess wrong sometimes. The best of us go broke when we don't guess right."

"You're broke, John?" Ellery asked.

"What do you think? Would I come to you if I could get money anywhere else?"

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"Why do you come to me?"

"You and I were boys together, Ellery," Carson said. "We're old friends. Was there ever a time when I would not have let you have money if you needed it?"

"How much do you want?" Ellery asked.

"I want five thousand," said Carson boldly. "I've got to have five thousand."

"That's a lot of money—for me," Ellery said. "I'm none of your mighty millionaires. I haven't any eight-thousand-dollar car; I don't pay any fourteen thousand dollars a year for apartments, like I've heard you do. I had to save my money dollar by dollar. Five thousand dollars! I live in half a house. Five thousand dollars!"

"You own your house," said Carson meekly. "I'm a renter."

"Fourteen thousand dollars a year! My son has to earn his own living. What's your collateral, if you want five thousand dollars?"

"That's it—I haven't any," Carson said, and laughed. "I'm asking you to trust me, Ellery."

"No collateral! You want me to lend on nothing! I don't do business that way. Who'll indorse? I've got to have something—you can't expect me to take chances. I work hard for my money. It don't come rolling in on me. Who can you get to indorse?"

"Nobody."

"Nobody! I won't do business that way, John. Five thousand dollars! Where's that great eight-thousand-dollar car of yours? You drove up in that, didn't you?"

"I got off the train at Middle Tucker last night, if that's what you want to know," Carson said. "I came from there on the bus, and I walked up this lane. And I never owned an eight-thousand-dollar car. I paid four thousand for that car; little enough."

"Your girl has a car; who owns that?" Ellery asked.

"She does; I won't touch that," Carson said.

"You can give me a bill of sale of your car," Ellery said. "I don't lend five thousand dollars without security of some sort. It's too much money. I'm no millionaire, I tell you."

ALL the while Carson saw that Ellery wanted to lend that money. He could not, he saw, keep Ellery from lending it now. It was salve to Ellery's soul to have John Carson come begging a loan. It lessened John Carson and put him in his proper place. Carson knew what Ellery was thinking— "This millionaire! Puff-ball millionaire, coming on his knees to beg a loan from me!"

"I've got to do anything you say," Carson said. "I'll give you a bill of sale. But don't think you'll lose a cent, Ellery. I'll pay the note when due."

"How long do you want the money for?" Ellery asked.

"Six months."

"Three months," said Ellery. "That's long enough." He enjoyed haggling over these details with John Carson, now that the man had come begging money. "Three months; I won't make it six months."

"I'm in no position to insist," Carson said.

"Three months; move that table over here and see if you can find a pen and ink anywhere."

"I've got a fountain pen," Carson said. "You see, I came all loaded, Ellery. I wasn't going away from here till I got this money. And what's this about Stan and Grace?"

"There's a check book in my coat,

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there in the closet," Ellery said. "You get it; I'm a sick man. What about my Stanton?"

"They want to get married, they tell me," Carson said, bringing the check book. "Your boy is a fine boy, Ellery; he'll make a good husband. I'd like to see Grace married to a man like Stanton; he'll always make a living, and I'm getting along in years, and a man can't tell what the market will do. I hoped I could fix Grace right when she married, but you see how it is. Here I'm begging a loan from you."

Ellery was writing. He lifted the pen while he studied what he had written—a note with a contingent bill of sale.

"You sign here," he said. "Give me the check book. I've nothing against your girl. I've been sick, under the weather, this jaundice coming on. Let them get married if they want to. I won't let them starve, job or no job, market or no market, millionaire or no millionaire. Let them get married. You can say I said so."

He handed the check to Carson, who put it in his wallet.

"I'll tell them," he said, and he held out his hand. "And I thank you for this money, Ellery. You don't know what lending it to me means. I'll never forget it. I've got to get back to New York now as quick as I can. Get well—you've got to go to a wedding before long. Good-by, Ellery."

Ellery took the proffered hand. A few minutes later he saw John Carson walking down the lane toward the road the bus traveled. He leaned back against the cushions of his rocking chair and smiled. Millionaire!

At the end of the lane John Carson caught the bus, and he, too, was smiling. The plan had worked and the thing to do now was to have Stan and Grace marry before Ellery was well enough to attend a wedding. This jaundice was a slow business and ought to tie the old fellow down for a month or two, which would be plenty of time. Well, it took brains to plan schemes and get what one wanted. John Carson borrowing five thousand dollars of Ellery Elliott! What a joke!

THE bus stopped at Middle Tucker and John Carson got out. He looked at his watch and saw it would be two hours before there was a down train, and he saw a car with "Taxi" smeared on the windshield in white paint. He could save two hours by driving to East Plains where Joe was waiting.

"Drive me down to East Plains?" he asked. "That's fine! Wait till I see if I can get a New York paper."

"I got one here," the taxi man said. "You couldn't get one, I guess; they're all sold out on account of the big doings in Wall Street yesterday."

"Big doings?" Carson asked, but the paper was in his hands and he looked at it—to see that he was no longer even a paper millionaire.

"They got a telegram at the *Clarion*," the taxi man confided cheerfully, "that says it was worse'n that to-day; the bottom fell clean out to-day. There wasn't no bottom left. Hit you any?"

"Yes, a little," said Carson.

He was cleaned out, that was certain. He had told Ellery no lie. He was no longer even a millionaire—hardly the millionth of a millionaire. He took a dollar from his pocket and gave it to the taxi man.

"I won't need you after all," he said.

He must get in touch with his brokers as soon as possible, must know what had happened even if it was ruin.

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As he entered the telegraph office he remembered the check in his pocket.

No matter what happened Ellery Elliott's check would be more than enough to pay for Grace's wedding and furnish a nice little apartment for her. He was not greatly concerned for himself; he felt in himself the strength to make another fortune. He poised his pencil over a telegraph blank, but his first message was not to his brokers; it was to Grace:

> Everything fixed. Arrange for wedding soonest possible date. Wire love and wedding invitation to Ellery Elliott. He was fine.

THE END.

Serpents as Pets

IN countries where serpents abound, pythons and boa-constrictors frequently become household pets. Such reptiles are practically harmless unless they are extremely large, and they will rid a house of rodents more rapidly than will cats. On the west coast of Mexico reptilian mousers are plentiful, but they are apt to cause an unpleasant thrill to the stranger who encounters one unexpectedly.

Although the ancient moat which formerly surrounded the Walled City of Manila has been filled in for more than a quarter century, the pythons which once infested it have not entirely disappeared. Many of them are believed to have taken up their residence in the wall, and in the old dungeons beneath it. From time to time the creatures crawl to the top of the wall itself, thereby interrupting the evening trysts of sweethearts in a most disconcerting manner.

The Chinese of Manila greatly appreciate the flesh of the python as food, and frequently natives of the country districts will be seen entering Chinatown with a long and extremely angry serpent lashed to a bamboo pole. Chinese connoisseurs will purchase no snake that is dead.

It is the belief of the lower classes of Filipinos that the visit of a python to a house where a birth has recently occurred is a harbinger of good luck. Instead of killing the serpent they feed it, and often maintain it for years. The larger native houses have mat ceilings and the space between these and the roof makes an ideal place for serpentine promenades. Americans resident in the Philippines become hardened to the sight of undulating mat ceilings, and the squeaking of pursued rats and mice. But when the head and several feet of a python's body are thrust through an aperture, even they voice their disapproval loudly. Not long ago a wild-eyed tourist clad in pyjamas dashed downstairs in a second-class Manila hotel, to complain to the clerk that his room had been invaded by a python. "Oh, sair," placated the Filipino, "do not be afraid, plis. That is Tommy, the house cat."

The greatest drawback of having snakes as pets comes from the inherent serpentine love for fowl. And since in the hot lands fighting cocks are usually tethered somewhere about each native residence, the nocturnal perambulations of reptiles are apt to rouse sleepers from their pleasant dreams.

C. A. Freeman.

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Pete seized his fellow convict and ran for the car

Flying Racketeers

When airman Pete Hargrave saw a chance to strike back at the crooks who had grounded and disgraced him, he did not stop to count the risks

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

Author of "Black Wings of Death," "The Three-Bottle Patrol," etc.

Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

"WANTED—DANGER!"

PETE HARGRAVE sat in Bryant Park until eleven o'clock, curiously watching the occupants of the other green benches. In his more prosperous days he had seen this shabby, hopeless gathering of down-and-outers, little dreaming that he might one day sit among them.

And now he was one of them, different only from the rest in that his vivid blue eyes were not dim and bloodshot from liquor or sickness or starvation and his blue serge suit was still well brushed and creased. His sun-bronzed face was thinner than usual; so was his long, rangy body. But that was because he hadn't eaten much for three or four days.

For the dozenth time he glanced automatically at a street clock. Queer, how those hands could drag around the dial. He had set eleven o'clock as the earliest possible moment to walk across Forty-Second Street to the *Times* office. Once again he pulled a crumpled copy of the morning paper out of his pocket and glanced at the advertise-

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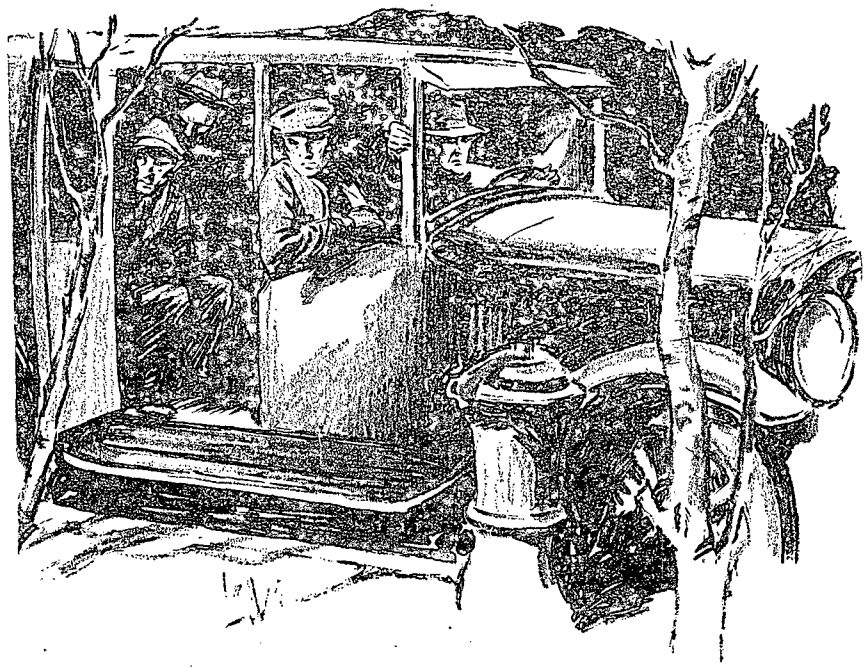

ment he had paid for with all but a few coins of his entire fortune.

It was a good ad, he told himself, well worth the money it had cost. It was among the "personals," rather than among the "positions wanted." More likely to attract attention, he had decided.

> Flyer wants tough job right now. War pilot, husky, 4,000 hours in air. Transport license. Can fly anything. Ready to go anywhere in world and to undertake any mission in air or on ground, no matter how distant or dangerous. Salary—whatever job is worth. Box 847, N. Y. Times.

"Nice, modest. little violet, I am," he muttered. A rueful smile illuminated the pinched, but good-humored features, accentuating the wide, generous mouth which contrasted oddly with the prominent, but somewhat combative chin below. He unfolded his well-knit body and rose. "And now," he murmured, as he turned westward through the winding paths, "we'll see what Lady Luck has to say to a bird who could eat a brace of hard-boiled cats."

He hesitated for an instant at the entrance to the *Times* Building as if not quite daring to march straight in and test his luck. Then, squaring his shoulders with a sudden, decisive shrug, he pushed through the revolving door, strode across to the counter and asked if there was any mail for Box 847. His blue eyes lighted in anticipation as the clerk flipped four envelopes toward him. Only a few hours since the paper had been issued, but four answers already! Perhaps he wasn't such a bad ad-writer after all. He picked up the envelopes with eager fingers and carried them to a quiet corner.

The first answer was from an employment agency, offering, for a fee, to put him on their list of applicants for positions. He crumpled it and threw it at the wastebasket. The sec-

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ond was from an aviation enthusiast who would accompany him across the Atlantic, provided Pete would furnish both the money and the plane. The third offered him a position selling get-rich-quick stocks on commission. But the fourth, and last, brought a quick gleam of hope into Hargrave's eyes.

The neatly printed letterhead bore the dignified imprint of the Apex Insurance Company, 17 Nassau Street. He read the letter eagerly.

> DEAR SIR:
> We are contemplating engaging some one with aviation experience to enter upon an undertaking in which there is a considerable degree of risk. If you are interested, kindly call at your earliest convenience at this office and ask for the undersigned.
> J. B. STURDY, Vice President.

Hargrave reached into his trousers pocket and withdrew a handful of small coins. He inspected them carefully. There was a total of fifty-two cents.

"Might as well be broke as the way I am," he decided. "A nickel for subway fare. Fifteen cents for cigarettes. That leaves thirty-two cents for a meal. I'll ride my hunch and shoot the works."

FORTY minutes later, fortified by a thirty-cent breakfast and two cigarettes—the first since the day before—he entered the reception office of the Apex Insurance Company and asked the information clerk for Mr. Sturdy.

"Who's calling, please?" she asked, surveying his bronzed, smiling face.

"Tell him it's in regard to the advertisement in this morning's *Times*," he told her.

She whispered into the phone, then nodded.

"Mr. Sturdy says to go right in. Third door to the left."

Hargrave found a door marked "Mr. Sturdy. Private," and entered. He found himself in a large, silent office, thickly carpeted and panelled in dull walnut. At the other end of the room was a flat-topped desk, behind which sat a white-haired man whose jet-black eyes stared steadily at the flyer as he advanced across the carpet. Mr. Sturdy, without speaking or taking his bright eyes from Hargrave's face, jerked his head toward a chair beside the desk. His level gaze encompassed his visitor's sun-bleached hair, strong, straight nose and white, even teeth. He missed no details of Pete's wide shoulders, tapering like a well-trained boxer's, nor of the waist which, at this moment, was even slimmer than usual. Even Pete's old suit, carefully brushed and pressed, passed under Mr. Sturdy's minute inspection.

"Name, please?" snapped the executive.

"Peter Hargrave." Watching closely, he thought the other's eyes flickered in surprise. But Mr. Sturdy's face was impassive.

"Out of a job?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Pete drew a deep breath. Of course he knew this question was likely to come, but he had hoped against hope. There was no sense in lying about it. He had given his right name—the bird would discover sooner or later.

"I lost a transport plane with three passengers," he said evenly, looking his inquisitor straight in the eyes.

"And *you* are living?" queried the other. "Did you drop out in a parachute?"

"I did not," said Pete, whitening a bit beneath the tan. "When the three

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engines all stopped at the same instant, I stuck with the ship until we hit the forest. We were over the Adirondacks, you see, and there wasn't a landing place in sight. We hit and I was thrown through the glass somehow. I woke up in a hospital."

"That was the Hudson Air Lines, Ltd., wasn't it?"

So the man had recognized that name? Pete was glad he had not attempted to dodge the issue.

"It was," he said laconically.

"And you were fired because you were drunk?" persisted the other, judicially.

"That's a damn lie!" snapped Pete, gripping the arms of his chair until his knuckles whitened.

"SEEMS to me," went on the executive, "I read in the papers something about you losing your head at the coroner's investigation and slugging a man named Hamilton, the operations manager."

"I'll say I did!" Pete burst out, his voice vibrating with rage. "And I'd have killed him, too, if they hadn't pulled me off. Red Hamilton was a liar, and he knew it. Wasn't it bad enough to have to remember killing three passengers—one of them a baby—without having Red Hamilton say it was caused by my being drunk? It was just an alibi for a rotten inspection system.

"When I signed out on that ship it had been okehed by the mechanical chief and by Red Hamilton himself. And at the trial they couldn't find the inspection chart! The ship was supposed to be in perfect condition. Three hours later the engines all conked at the same time. But you notice that the Department of Commerce inspectors didn't take my license away, and those birds have hearts that pump ice water. That shows you they didn't believe I was drunk, in spite of the fact Red Hamilton swore I was!"

He drew a deep breath and pulled himself together. Then, remembering, he stared at the other in astonishment. "But how do you happen to know so much about those things?" he demanded. "You're in the insurance business."

"I'll explain later," the other replied. "Were you an ace in the war?"

"No. I got two Jerries. It took five to be an ace. Nowadays any one who's ever soloed calls himself an ace. It's all the bunk."

"You got two Germans, eh? I suppose," Mr. Sturdy added carelessly, "you got others that were not confirmed?"

"No. I only got two and they were both confirmed."

"Why haven't you tried to get another job?"

"I'm blacklisted by all the big transport operators. They aren't hiring pilots who lose big ships—and passengers. I've been to the small, independent fields, but the flying business is pretty thin just now. I've even tried to get a job as a mechanic, but there are five men on the waiting lists for every job. And so far I haven't been coward enough to change my name. Maybe I'll come to it, some day, but not until I've tried every other kind of a job in the world and am starving. And even before that, there's the Foreign Legion."

"Are you in earnest about being willing to undertake a really dangerous mission?"

"Yes—provided it isn't anything like bootlegging, smuggling, or the like."

Mr. Sturdy tilted back in his swivel

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chair and looked thoughtfully into a far corner of the room. He tapped a pencil against the edge of his polished walnut desk. Then, suddenly, he reached for his telephone, which was equipped with an odd box-like arrangement over the transmitter mouthpiece. He pressed his mouth close to it and talked. Pete could not even hear the murmur of his voice.

The executive hung up and once again went into a thoughtful silence. Three or four soundless minutes dragged by. An office boy entered and placed a file folder in front of him. He opened it, studied a sheaf of papers and then turned decisively toward the waiting flyer.

"Did you ever hear of racket insurance?" he asked abruptly.

"No."

"You know what rackets are?"

"Are you talking about the way the gangsters hold up businesses for 'protection' money?"

"Yes. They go to one industry after another, demanding so much a week or a month for so-called protection and if they aren't paid, they slug and burn and even kill. For years they have been milking Chicago to the tune of millions of dollars. Now they're in New York."

"Among the other forms of coverage we offer our clients," he continued, observing Pete sharply, "is a brand-new form of policy, which, for lack of a better name, we call 'racket insurance.' For a certain premium we insure business against the necessity of paying protection money to racketeers. It is not yet profitable this branch of our business, but due to the warfare we are waging on the tribute-levying gangsters, we have been able to cut our losses on other policies, such as liability, fire, accident, plate-glass, theft, etc.

"Before we became interested in racketeers and their ways, our losses on these other coverages were mounting in leaps and bounds. They are still mounting, by the way, but at a slower rate. There are about a dozen prominent racketeers serving time now, due to our efforts. We work with the police, with the Federal officers and, in addition, we have our own private force of detectives."

HE glanced down at the sheaf of papers before him. Pete watched him attentively, wondering what all this meant to him, a flyer out of a job.

"If you hadn't told me all about your unfortunate crash," Mr. Sturdy proceeded, "I should not have told you this. But we have information on all the big transport companies, since we cover many of them on liability and not a few on racket insurance. Did you ever hear that the Hudson Air Lines were paying tribute to racketeers?"

"No."

"We have heard that they were doing so. Therefore we were interested in your crash. It occurred to us at first that the stoppage of your engines was due to tampering, but—"

He paused as a sudden gleam came into Pete's eyes.

"—but we were able to find no such evidence, nor was the Department of Commerce. Not having insured the Hudson people, of course, we were not as free to investigate as we would have been had we covered them."

"If I thought," Pete burst out, hotly, "that any one had deliberately caused me to crash, I'd—"

"Please!" interrupted Mr. Sturdy, holding up his hand. "Hear me through, please. We'll get down to

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brass tacks. Within the past month the racketeers have been offering protection to the air line operators. Some of them have paid it. Hudson Air Lines have been paying it, according to our information. Others have not paid it because we are covering them on racket-insurance. But our clients have had, between them, four forced landings in the past five days. Fortunately, none of them have ended fatally.

"We have caused one of the leading graft solicitors to be arrested. He is in jail now. But he isn't a big-timer and we haven't been able to sweat out of him who he is working for. We're still trying to find the leader in his enterprise."

"Do you mean to tell me," demanded Pete, "that the racketeers have threatened to crash big transports unless the operators pay them graft?"

"Yes. They have not only threatened to do so, but they've actually tried. And unless we succeed in putting a stop to it, unless we're able to break up these gangs, there'll be a crash that will be even more horrible than yours. The police and the Federal men are working on it right now. So are our own private detectives. But it may be necessary to fight fire with fire—gun with gun—and that's why I'm talking to you.

"You are known to be out of a job. It is possible that you may be sore at the Hudson people for putting the blame on you. That's an ideal combination. It's possible that you can do more for us than any of our regular people. Do you want to try?"

"You mean I'm to try to break up that racket that's being worked on the transport operators?"

"Exactly. But it will be dangerous business. We won't be able to give you much personal protection. But we'll steer you on the right track to begin with. After that you'll have to use your own ingenuity. If you get yourself into trouble, or into danger, we probably won't be able to help you very much. But the job's worth one hundred dollars a week and expenses and there will be a bonus of five thousand dollars if you find the way to stop this particular racket. How about it?"

"You're on," snapped Pete, briefly. "While you were talking, I got a sudden hunch about my own crash. I'd work for the price of three meals and a place to sleep."

"It won't be necessary. Now pay attention and I'll tell you how you're to start."

And the two went into a huddle that lasted until long after lunch time.

CHAPTER II.

A PLOT IS HATCHED.

THE cell door closed with a clang. Pete Hargrave turned on his heel, stared after the departing turnkey and shouted curses at the back of the heedless man.

"Ah, pipe down, punk!" snarled a voice from the rear of the cell.

Pete spun around and glared into the dimness of the cubicle. There, seated on one of the twin bunks, was a man whose figure was silhouetted blackly against the opposite wall.

"Who's going to make me pipe down?" Pete demanded grimly. "Unless you're a lot bigger than I think you are, I'm going to slug you on the nose."

"Ah, what 'll it get you?" retorted the other, carelessly. "Got a draft in your attic, sounding off like that? Sit down and let your head get well."

Muttering angrily beneath his

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breath, Pete stumbled to the other cot and threw himself on it at full length. For some moments his cell mate watched him in silence. Finally:

"What you in for, punk?"

"Carrying concealed weapons. Sullivan Law," snapped Pete.

"How long'd they give you?"

"One year."

"Jeez, they soaked you, didn't they?"

"Some one double-crossed me," grated Pete. "And when I find out who did it, I'll bump him if it's the last thing I do."

"Well, you got plenty of time to think about it, buddy," the other consoled him. "What's your moniker?"

"Pete Hargrave."

"Seems like I heard that name somewheres," said the other, reflectively. "What's your racket?"

"I used to be a flyer," replied Pete. "Now I—well, never mind. My racket is my own business."

"A flyer—Pete Hargrave—" Pete could hear the other mumbling thoughtfully. It was clear that the combination meant something to his cell mate. At last, from the other, "My name's Slick Rosen. Ever hear it?"

"No," snapped Pete, and let it go at that. He closed his eyes and pretended to sleep, but lay there listening to the prison sounds that buzzed through the great stone building. The air was fetid, his cot hard. The four walls of his cell seemed to press in on him as if they were about to snap together like the sides of a trap. To a man whose eyes were focused to look at far horizons, the very closeness of those walls was a horror.

He heard Slick Rosen stirring about, but he paid no attention. Slick Rosen, the man who had collected "protection" money from one air line after another, threatening to cause crashes if the money was not paid regularly. Well, here he was, within a dozen feet of Pete's clenched hands. Pete wondered if he could stand it; whether, before many hours or days had passed, he wouldn't run amuck and clasp his two hands around Slick's neck and squeeze the truth out of him.

PETE opened his eyes and stared grimly up at the ceiling. Once again a vision had come to him of that soft-looking carpet of green forests and undulating hills. No landing place in sight. Just behind the partition were three passengers, a man, a woman and a baby. He could still hear the awful silence of his slow glide toward those tree-tops. Not a sound in the whole world except the whispering of the wind through wires and struts. He knew, again, the cold hand of fear clutching at his heart; fear for his passengers, not for himself. How carefully he had levelled out just over those tree-tops, trying to kill the forward speed of his big bus!

He had had one wild moment of hope. Perhaps the trees had cushioned the blow. And then the big ship had slewed around, toppling trees like matchsticks. A huge tree trunk had leaped straight at him. And that was all. At the hospital they had told him he, alone, was alive. He didn't know he groaned, but he heard Slick Rosen's voice, sneering, insolent.

"Ah, pipe down, punk! If you want to play cry-baby, put on the muffler, will you?"

For an instant, Pete's nerves and muscles jerked with desire to throttle the man who would not hesitate to send other ships, other passengers, crashing down to earth. But he forced himself

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to remain where he was. Killing this one rat wouldn't end the racket he represented. He was merely one cog in the wheel. It was the wheel itself that must be smashed. A single cog could be replaced—it had probably been replaced already. If he, Pete, were to lose control of himself now it would ruin everything, completely spoiling the plans that had been so carefully laid and, so far, so perfectly executed.

He wondered how many men in this grim gray building were in on his secret. The warden, certainly. He hoped there were no others. His commitment papers were in order; Mr. Sturdy had seen to that. He had arrived with a dozen other prisoners and had submitted with them to all the formalities of entering. But it had been the warden who had somehow seen to it that he had been placed in the same cell with Slick Rosen.

Now it was up to Pete. Cautiously he lifted his left foot as if to scratch his ankle. Yes, there in the heel was a loose plug. The warden had arranged that, too. Pete dared not remove the plug, dark as the cell seemed now. Slick Rosen's eyes would be accustomed to the dimness. And at any moment the night lights would be turned on. Pete rolled over on his face, composed himself and presently went to sleep.

THE longest week that Pete had ever known had finally dragged to a close. Now, sitting on the edge of his cot and looking across at Slick Rosen, Pete was conscious that his pulses were hammering with excitement. Within the next half hour he would know whether or not he had been a convincing prisoner, whether or not this horrible week had been wasted.

Slick Rosen, under-sized, undernourished rat from the sewers of Delancey Street, was sitting opposite him, so close that their knees nearly touched. The man's furtive little brown eyes could never remain still. They flicked across at Pete's lean-chiselled face, then fluttered away uneasily. His lips, full and rounded like those of his Hebrew forbears, were l o o s e and flaccid, but oddly twisted into a perpetual sneer, as if Slick looked upon the world and found it full of suckers waiting to be fleeced. His greasy black hair was wet and carefully plastered back. Pete wondered whether it was because of his hair or his character that he had acquired the nickname "Slick."

"What is it you was going to tell me after supper, punk?" whispered Slick, with a furtive glance at the steel mesh screen in the panel of the cell door.

"I'm going to crush out," replied Pete, stealthily.

"How?" demanded Slick, with a wise sneer. "Going to start a riot? Them things never get you anywheres. Just get a lot of guys killed and bread and water for a month."

"Nix," said Pete. He reached over, pulled the loose plug from the heel of his shoe and withdrew a coiled saw blade of spring steel, which he cautiously showed the other. "With the way this bites, I can saw my way out of that window in three nights. There's a clear drop to the street below the window. I'll make it, easy. I had to show you because you're in this coop with me. You can join me or not, just as you please."

"And how you going to lam away after you crush out?" demanded Slick. "You can't get more'n to the next corner with that suit of grays on."

"I don't care," said Pete, earnestly.

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"I can't stand it here and I'm going to beat it if they fill me full of slugs the minute my feet hit the street! Want to come along?"

"Wait a minute," snapped Slick. "Let me think."

He was silent for several long minutes. Then he looked up brightly at Pete.

"Maybe I can get word to the mob outside," he whispered. "They could have a car out there waiting for us and a change of clothes, too. Listen, buddy, to-morrow's visitors day." Pete knew that. It was why his announcement had been made at this crucial moment. Slick went on, eagerly: "You sure your saw will cut those bars in three nights?"

"In two, if we took shifts working," Pete assured him.

"Make it three. I'll have a car outside this window at, say, two in the morning, on the third night from now. And we'll work like the devil from now till then. We'll start at 'lights out' and one of us watch for the guards while the other works, hey?"

Pete nodded, trying to keep the eagerness out of his eyes.

"Got any money?" he asked.

Slick's eyes became masked.

"Not a thin dime," he replied. "Have you?"

"No, but I'll have some an hour after I'm out of here."

"How'll you get it?" challenged Slick.

"I'll grab some bird by the neck and take it away from him," replied Pete, grimly.

"Listen, guy," said Slick, huskily. "If you get us both out of here, maybe I can put you in line for some easy dough."

"How?"

"You were a flyer, hey?" Pete nodded. "Well, I know a big shot who is interested in this flying racket. Maybe he could use a guy like you."

PETE forced his voice to seem indifferent. "I don't know whether I'm going to want a regular job or not," he said.

"This ain't punching a time clock, kid," Slick assured him. "This Big Shot I mean lays heavy jack right on the line, see, and you work a little and then you got plenty of time and money to play with. You let me talk to him if we crush out. Maybe I can get you a house and lot on Easy Money Street. Can you handle a Tommy gun?"

"Never tried," said Pete. "But with a Lewis gun I can shoot the eye out of a mosquito at a thousand yards."

"Jeez, it was a lucky break we were both tossed in the same can," Slick affirmed. "You got just what the Big Shot needs. He could stand in the middle of Times Square and throw a cobblestone and it would hit a muscle man or a torpedo or a pay-off man who'd give his right eye to hook up with the Big Feller. But what you got he can use, see; I know it."

"Well, he's got to have plenty of what I need, too," retorted Pete, "because there's too much jack in solo work these days to throw in with a mob if you aren't sure there's more money in it. What's the name of this Big Shot of yours? Do I know him?"

"If you know anything about mobs, you know it," said Slick significantly. "But I ain't spreading any names on the blotter. That's why I've lived this long and made the jack I have."

"He might be Pussyfoot Johnson himself for all I care," yawned Pete, "but I'm not much excited. If he was as hot as you say, you wouldn't be sitting here in the cooler."

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"Listen, guy," said Slick earnestly, "the Big Feller gives me a yard a week while I'm here. Yes, sir, one hundred big, heavy, iron men. And in a little while, when people have forgotten what I'm jugged for, he drops an even five grand in the right place and I'm out, see? Never mind how, but I'm out. If you and me crushes together, I save him five gees, and he's happy, see?"

"How'll you get word to him to have the car out there?"

"A guy comes here every visiting day to see if I need anything. That's all there is to it. I need a car, see, and it 'll be there."

"Why didn't he slip you a saw?"

"Can't get close enough together. And the guards are watching. Nothing doing. You're a pretty wise punk to bring one in. And now, in a minute, lights will be out. Let's hop to it."

They moved Slick's cot beneath the window. While his cellmate stood at the door watching the corridor for an approaching guard, Pete greased his hacksaw with a bit of soap, climbed upon the cot and began to work on the steel bars.

The whole thing was running like clockwork, yet Pete was conscious of no sense of elation. Mr. Sturdy had thought it entirely possible that, once Pete had secured the confidence of his fellow prisoner, Slick would tell him everything he knew. Then, at one swoop, the entire conspiracy against the air line operators might be broken up. Perhaps the entire system of racketeering might receive a death blow as a result of a few incautious sentences. The warden, however, had been right. He had prophesied that Slick would not dare to talk. It would be necessary, the warden reluctantly suggested, to stage an actual escape in order to penetrate into the secrets of the mob that was levying upon business. And in the meantime, precious time had slipped past. To be sure, no more outrages had occurred to air transports, but at any time—to-night, even—one of the big ships might crash to her doom.

At the end of an hour Pete lowered his aching arm.

"Come on, Slick," he said, forcing a note of friendliness into his voice, "we've got a lot of steel to cut. It's your turn."

CHAPTER III.

A PRISON BREAK.

THREE nights later. Through the steel mesh of the cell door came the sound of men snoring, of men mumbling and groaning in their sleep, of men turning restlessly on their hard cots. It was as near as that titanic beehive of human misery ever came to complete silence.

Pete, swiftly knotting the ends of the blankets into one long rope, was conscious that his nerves and muscles were quivering like those of a race horse before the barrier. Slick, now stripping his cot of its blanket, had accomplished his part in the conspiracy perfectly. He had succeeded in getting out word to his friends; he had worked like a fiend on the sawing of those steel bars in the window. Pete hoped that he himself had done as well.

The previous afternoon, just after lunch, he had feigned sudden illness. The prison surgeon had not been impressed, but, when the routine sick report had reached the warden's office, the latter official had instantly recognized that Pete wished to see him. Twenty minutes later Pete had stood

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before the warden and had whispered his plans for the get-away.

"You'll have to watch yourself," the warden had warned him. "I simply can't take all the guards on the wall into my confidence. It would get back into the prison as sure as the sun rises and sets. Within twenty-four hours the grapevine would carry it outside, and you'd be put on the spot. But I had you put in the only cell block in the place where it might be possible for you to make a break.

"It is the oldest one here, and, as you know, backs right onto the street, forming part of the wall itself. There will be no other wall for you to climb.

"When you drop out of the window you'll be on the sidewalk. It has always been a weak point, that wall, and I'm mighty careful what prisoners I put in that building. As soon as we get the appropriation we're going to tear it down and build another inside the enclosure."

He had lighted a cigarette and stared thoughtfully at the grim young man in the prison uniform.

"Tell you what I can do, Hargrave," he had said at last. "There are two guards who would be able to shoot you as you drop into the street. One is in the watch tower at the easterly end of the wall, the other at the westerly end. I can trust the man on the east tower. I'll have to tell him what is planned. He'll have to shoot at you, but he won't hit you. I'm not sure enough of the other man, and I hardly dare transfer him just for that one night. It would be too raw. But I can telephone him from my office at the moment your car is timed to arrive. I can hold him in conversation for a minute or two. But it's a chance. You are good and likely to get a slug through you. Are you willing to take the chance?"

"Listen, warden," Pete had said grimly. "If I knew I had one chance out of ten, I'd take it. Do you realize I might be able to discover who it was made me crash and kill those three passengers? The very possibility of that would make me try to scale any wall you've got in broad daylight! You don't know what it is, warden, not to be able to sleep, thinking of those passengers, especially the baby. He was the cutest little feller—and he laughed at me when I winked back at him from the cockpit! Twenty minutes later he was dead—and I'm going to find out who caused it. I did everything I could, but—"

His voice had trailed off miserably. He had unclenched his hands with an effort of will.

"I know," nodded the warden kindly. "It's only to avoid such things that I've consented to this escape. And I'll confess to you that I don't like it, even now. But orders came to me straight from Albany, and I don't suppose I could have bucked it if I had tried. But it's your hide you're risking. I'm warning you and I've warned Albany. All the same, son, I wish you luck and I hope you find out who caused you to crash. Now go back to your cell and tell Rosen that I bawled you out for complaining about a mere belly-ache."

NOW it was two minutes before two. Five minutes ago a car had purred past the prison wall and had twice honked its horn as it had turned the corner below the east watch tower.

That was the signal. Slick's friends were ready. The bars had been cut in three nights of the hardest kind of

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labor. Everything was ready for the effort which might lead to—where?

Working feverishly, Pete tied the blanket-rope to the frame of the cot and jerked at the severed bars.

"Come on, Slick, make it snappy," he whispered. "Help me bend these bars so we can get through. There. Want to go first?"

"What time is it?" Slick's voice was shaking with excitement.

"One minute of two."

"You—you go first," begged Slick.

"And see if it's safe, eh?" snapped Pete, disgustedly. "All right, let's go."

As he wriggled out through the V-shaped space between the twisted bars he heard the muffled exhaust of a high-powered car in the street below. With a convulsive motion of his rangy body he eased himself over the jagged ends of the bars and began to lower himself down the rope of knotted blankets.

There would be a bad fall at the bottom. The window was on the third floor. The rope extended less than halfway to the brick sidewalk below. But it was good to be out in the cool, clean air of the outer world.

Down, one hand after another. The sound of the purring car grew louder. Now Pete could see it, moving slowly along the street outside the wall, apparently gauging its speed to arrive at the appointed spot upon the exact instant of two o'clock.

Now the blanket-rope was jerking. Slick's feet and legs appeared out of the window above. Pete had reached the end of the last blanket. A twenty-foot drop yawned beneath his feet. The black car was stopping at the curb.

A bright stream of crimson licked out from the watch tower at the easterly end of the wall. The quiet night was ripped apart by the sound of machine gun fire, echoing and reëchoing from wall to wall.

"Easy, boy, easy!" Pete muttered to himself, staring down to measure the length of his fall. "That's from the east tower. He's not aiming at us."

He let go. The brick pavement leaped up at him. But his muscles were young and springy. He rolled over and over; leaped to his feet and ran, crouching, toward the car. A black tube was projecting from the rear curtains, slanting upward toward the east watch tower. It spat out a blue-tipped tongue of flame. Out of the corner of his eye Pete saw that a blinking spear-point of crimson was darting from the westerly watch-tower, too.

Something snapped past his head. He had heard that sound before, in those red days of war when men lived from minute to minute. For an instant it all came back to him, that feeling that he would live until he stopped a bullet marked with his name. It seemed as if an ox-driver were cracking a whip about his head; he was running, but wasn't getting anywhere.

The rear door of the black touring car swung open. A hand reached out and jerked Pete inside.

He was on his hands and knees, crawling over somebody's legs to reach the seat. There were two men in the tonneau, two more in the front seat. The world was reverberating to the staccato hammering of machine guns.

"Jeez, Slick's down!" croaked one of the men within that black tent of top and curtains.

PETE didn't know that he had turned, but he found himself back on the sidewalk, racing across the dozen steps which separated Slick's limp figure from the idling car. He

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hadn't stopped to consider; Slick wasn't a gangster; he was a soldier lying out in the vomiting inferno of No-man's Land. Those were Jerry bullets ripping through the darkness.

Once, before being ordered to flying school at Avord, Pete had lain helpless in the wire; he had never forgotten the blinding pain, the killing hopelessness. Before he had remembered that Slick was a dirty rat from the sewers of the underworld he had picked the man up and was shambling across the sidewalk and plunging into the patch of blackness that marked the rear tonneau.

The car lurched ahead with a screaming of rubber against concrete. The tattoo of machine gun fire was blotted out in the unleashed roar of the wide-open engine. The four men huddled in the rear were tossed into a heap as the car ricocheted around a corner. Then, like dice in a box, they were thrown into the opposite corner. There was the thunder of the engine, the murmur of men swearing under their breaths and the weak, painful hic-coughing of Slick, who presently became very still.

The car had settled down to a steady pace, her engine humming smoothly. Over the motionless heads of the two gunmen in the front seat Pete could see an endless ribbon of white concrete swiftly unrolling under the incandescent blaze of the twin searchlights.

Slick, as limp as a bundle of old rags, had slipped from the seat and now lay sprawled in the black pool of the floor. Pete had tried to hold him upright, but the man on the other side had given him no assistance. Now, as the car cut a slice of white light through the darkness of open country, the man on Pete's left snapped a curt word of command to the driver. The car coasted to a stop beside the road.

"This Slick, here," growled the man. "He's dead as a mackerel. Can't go back to town with him in here."

He clicked the door handle and clambered out of the car. Then, with no more compunction than if he were removing a sack of concrete, he reached into the car, seized Slick's legs and dragged him out. That was all. He reëntered the tonneau, sat down and wiped his hands with a handkerchief. The car swam ahead and resumed its swift, steady run through the night.

Pete's hands twitched in the darkness, twitched with an eagerness to grab one of those snub-nosed machine guns and turn it loose on the four gunmen there in the car.

HE gritted his teeth and forced himself to remain calm, immobile, in the dark box of a tonneau. These men, he guessed shrewdly, were like Slick. They weren't the principals; they were just tools. And it was the principals that Pete was after. The little fellows could come later.

"What's your moniker?" snapped the man who had dragged Slick out of the car.

"Pete Hargrave," replied the flyer, briefly.

"What's your racket?"

"Are you the Big Shot?" demanded Pete, insolently. "I'm telling my business to him."

"Oh yeah?" snarled the other. "Gimme any your lip and I'll smoke you off, see?"

"Is that what the Big Shot told you to do?" Pete gritted out. "Because if it is, you can stop the car. Give me a gun and five seconds. Then I'll shoot it out with the lot of you."

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There was an instant of startled silence. Pete, every nerve and muscle taut for instant action, held his breath. He saw the dim gray oval of a man's face turned toward him from the front seat.

"Aw, shut up, Lefty!" cracked the man in the front seat. "Give the guy his clothes and mutton your yap."

One of the men in the rear unwrapped a large paper bundle which Pete had seen on the floor. He tossed a shirt, collar, necktie and a suit of clothes into the flyer's lap.

"Peel off your uniform," he ordered. "Get into these clothes."

Just as the car rolled into the northerly outskirts of the Bronx, Pete completed his dressing. His suit of dark blue serge was tight across the back and shoulders, short at wrists and ankles, but it would do.

He sat back in silence, staring moodily ahead through that segment of windshield which was visible between the heads and shoulders of the two men in the front seat. The driver turned south after crossing the Harlem River. The upper reaches of Seventh Avenue were almost deserted except for little clumps of men and women standing about the entrances of uptown night clubs. Fifth Avenue, a mirror-like tape of freshly-washed asphalt, slipped under the humming wheels of the black car.

Pete marked familiar buildings and when the driver swung into a side street, he knew that they were in the upper Forties. Almost to Broadway they sped, then came to a lurching stop in front of a smallish hotel, one of the scores which line the streets immediately adjacent to the theatrical district.

"C'mon," said the spokesman—he who had dumped Slick's body into the ditch. "Don't talk; just follow me."

Without looking back he marched into the lobby. Instinctively Pete's eyes ranged the front of the building. No fire-escape broke the windowed expanse of the narrow eight-story structure. Tall business buildings towered over the hotel to right and to left. In an emergency, Pete decided, he'd have to bolt to the rear. That was where the fire-escape would be.

Without a sound of gears the car slid away with its three silent men. Pete walked after his guide. A sleepy desk clerk glanced incuriously after him as he and the man called Lefty strode through the deserted lobby.

CHAPTER IV.

COMMANDED TO MURDER.

NOW, under the pinkish light from the overhead dome, Pete had his first opportunity to look at his companion. Lefty was undersized, almost boyish-looking in his pin-checked, too cleverly cut suit of Oxford gray. His eyes, beneath heavy, drooping lids, were nearly colorless, yet when his glance met Pete's, the flyer was startled at the cold, merciless impact of those pale green eyes. Lefty's lips were thin, almost bloodless. They jerked just a little at the left corner.

With something of an effort Pete wrenched his glance away from those whose pale gaze was probing through and through him. Here, he told himself, was a man who could delight in the act of murder as another might enjoy a game of golf or a stunt hop in a fast plane. If he and Lefty should ever tangle, Pete decided, there would be no Marquis of Queensbury rules. His scalp tingled as the conviction suddenly swept over him that some day

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he would clash with this killer. In some curious way it seemed inevitable.

The elevator came to a stop at the eighth floor. Lefty stepped out and marched down a carpeted hallway. He knocked a strange, uneven tattoo on a door, then, after an instant's pause, turned the handle. Pete followed him into the room and found himself in a typical hotel "sitting room," furnished with conventional hotel furniture.

Four hard-faced young men had been playing penny ante at the center table, but now the cards were motionless in their hands. A curious air of rigid expectancy was in their faces as the two men entered. Their eyes were focused on Pete.

"Boss in?" asked Lefty.

The tense watchfulness vanished from the faces of the card players. Their eyes drifted back to their cards.

"Uh-huh," some one grunted.

A card slapped against the table.

Lefty led the way to a door on the opposite side, knocked and entered. This was another "sitting room," an exact duplicate of the first, even to the furniture. Two suites had apparently been thrown together to make a single large apartment.

Through a half-opened door on the other side of the center table Pete could see a corner of a bedroom. A short, paunchy man, clad in pyjamas and a lounging robe of flowered blue silk, strolled into the room.

"'Lo, Lefty," he said.

But his eyes, deep-set and of a blue-gray that was like chilled steel, were examining Pete. They seemed to be weighing, measuring and classifying the flyer, making their appraisals instantly and telegraphing their findings to a brain that was even colder than the chilled-steel eyes.

There was something of power, of ruthlessness, of cold calculation in the man's face that was even more disturbing than the expression of his underling, Lefty, who was merely a killer.

This Big Shot, Pete guessed, did not cause murder for fun, as Lefty might. To the leader, murder was an incident, a convenience, something to be neither feared nor enjoyed.

Yet he was a bit of a dandy, this Big Shot. Even now, at nearly four in the morning, he looked as if he had just left the barber's chair. His pink face was thrice-shaven, the gloss of his smooth face dulled by a barely perceptible trace of powder. His sparse brown hair was well pomaded and carefully brushed back over a bald spot on his crown. His pudgy fingers were manicured. He smelled faintly of *lilac vegetal.*

"Slick," announced Lefty, "got a stomachful of slugs from the machine guns on the wall. We had to dump him in a ditch just north of Mount Vernon."

THE gray-blue eyes swiveled away from Pete, but if the Big Shot was regretful at the sudden demise of one of his lieutenants, he made no sign. He screwed a cigarette into a long blue holder and produced a bright flame from a patent lighter. He inhaled deeply, squinting at Pete through the drifting smoke.

"You're Peter Hargrave?" he demanded abruptly.

"Yes."

"I know about you. You got a rotten deal out of the Hudson Air Lines, didn't you?"

"I'll say I did!" replied Pete, his eyes flaming hot.

"Broke?"

"Flat."

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"Want to work for me?" asked the Big Shot.

"Doing what?"

"Obeying orders," snapped the other abruptly. "Flying, mostly."

"I'll fly for you," retorted Pete calmly, "but it depends on what your orders are whether I'll obey them or not."

"So?" murmured the Big Shot carelessly. He polished the glittering finger nails of one hand against the palm of the other and made no effort to suppress a yawn. Then, very softly:

"Listen, punk, you may be too dumb to know it, but you're on a hot spot right now. Every bull in the city will be itching to put the finger on you. All we got to do is to boot you out into the street and you got as much chance to do a fade-out as an elephant has of disappearing on Broadway. We—"

The telephone on his desk buzzed. The Big Shot broke off, picked up the transmitter and listened.

"Yeah," the other two heard him say. "All right, Mose . . . Larry won't lay the dough on the line, hey? . . . Yeah . . . All right, stop his milk trucks on the Hackensack meadows. Pour a little kerosene into every milk can . . . Yeah . . . Muscle the drivers, but not too much this time . . . Yeah, then come back to town . . . I got a job for you with the window washers. Pick up a few bricks out there in the country and bring 'em in . . . Yeah . . . 'By."

He dropped the receiver on the hook, then turned back to Pete.

"Listen, punk," he said. "When anybody owes us something, we collect, see? We picked you up outside the can and took you away on the lam and—"

"Fair enough," interrupted Pete, amiably, "but don't forget I helped Slick to crush out; you didn't. The fact that he was killed wasn't my fault. An even break; I got him out, you took us away."

"Ah the devil!" growled the man Lefty. "Boss, this guy is fresh. You ain't going to be able to handle him. Give him the air."

The Big Shot screwed another cigarette into his holder and lighted it with thoughtful deliberation. Pete's eyes shifted from his face to the scowling Lefty, waiting tensely for something to happen. Had he overplayed his hand? Well, if anything started he'd have one chance in a hundred. But it was worth the chance.

Somehow he must make an impression on this Big Shot; he must get to the bottom of this racketeering business, and quickly, before any more transports were forced down. And he couldn't do that, he had decided, unless the Big Shot took a real interest in him. It wouldn't do at all just to be "one of the mob."

"Yeah," said the Big Shot, evenly, looking down at the smoking tip of his cigarette. "He *is* fresh, Lefty, but he's got nerve, too, and nerve is what we need in this racket. And now, kid," he said, suddenly turning his chilled steel eyes directly at Pete, "you got to make a choice. Work for me and there's three yards, three hundred bucks, a week in it for you and we keep you out of the bulls' hands.

"Turn me down and what are you? You're a bum who can't fly for anybody because you get drunk on the job; you're a con who crushed out of the pen; and what's more," his face suddenly became a mask of malevolence, hard, implacable, infinitely cunning, "you're a murderer. You killed your own buddy, Slick, and I'll send a dozen witnesses to the prosecuting attorney

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to swear they saw you turn your heat on him. They'll be good witnesses, too, who never been picked up for anything at all."

PETE'S fingers itched to clasp themselves around that pinkly-shaven throat, but he held his peace. This was what he wanted. They'd double-cross him, would they? Deliberately he assumed an expression of anxiety.

"It looks as if you had me," he said. "Now what do you want me to do?"

He glanced up in time to see a triumphant look pass from the Big Shot to Lefty.

"I knew you'd see it right," said the gang leader. "No sense committing suicide. Sit down." He pointed to an overstuffed chair on the other side of the table. "Here's the dope, kid. I know you want to take a crack at the Hudson Air Lines, because they did you dirt."

"How do *you* know they did?" demanded Pete.

"Because they fired you for being drunk. They said you crashed that plane because you were crocked. But I know you weren't, because I know what happened to that plane. You were telling the straight goods when you said the motors quit on you. I know, because I paid for fixing them so they would quit, see?"

"Sit down!" snapped Lefty.

Pete, who scarcely knew that he had surged forward in his chair, set his teeth and forced his tense muscles to relax. Something flat and black slid back into Lefty's shoulder holster.

"Listen, kid," continued the Big Shot, who had not moved a muscle, "I got too much jack on the table to fool any more with these airplane fellers, see? There's forty-fifty planes a day leave out of the airports around New York. I made the transport fellers a proposition, and a reasonable one, too.

"Five bucks a day a plane; that was all. Not much for each line to pay, but it runs into about a grand and a half a week, and that's good dough. I got some of the operators feeding the kitty, but some of 'em are holding out on me and this here Hudson Air Lines is one of them, see? They got an Operations Manager named Hamilton, who thinks he's hard and he told Slick Rosen, who was my collector, to go to the deuce."

There was something funny about that, thought Pete, as the Big Shot paused to light another cigarette. The insurance man, Mr. Sturdy, had said that the Hudson people were paying protection money to the racketeers. And why hadn't Hamilton blamed the racketeers for the crash instead of trumping up the charge of drunkenness against the pilot? Pete resolved to find some way to telephone to Mr. Sturdy and to have the insurance company's private detectives check up on this loose end.

"So what we got to do," went on the gangster, "is to show the air line companies they got to kick in, before some of those who are already paying us quit on us and make us start all over again."

"How are you going to do it?" said Pete, wondering how he could speak so calmly.

"By giving them another damn good wreck!" snapped the Big Shot, his eyes glittering frostily. "So far we just been playing with them. This time we do a job they won't forget. By this time to-morrow night they'll be fighting for places in the line to pay us off."

"What are you going to do?" demanded the flyer.

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"We've found out," said the Big Shot, "that to-morrow's Montreal plane is sold out. There's an Elks convention at Montreal and every seat in their morning plane was engaged a week ago. When that plane gets up in the deserted country over the Adirondacks it's going into a crash that won't leave no piece bigger than what a baby can walk away with!"

TO-MORROW morning; that would probably be *this* morning! Pete felt cold beads of perspiration gather on his face. He must find some way to get out of here and to warn the Hudson people not to send that plane away! It did not occur to him that this man would fail to carry out his threat. It was perfectly obvious that the Big Shot regarded the lives of the passengers and crew of that big transport as worthy of no consideration at all. They were simply helpless pawns in a game whose stakes were the only things of importance. When hundreds of gangsters were killed in internecine warfare each year, a score of passengers were incidental; that was all.

"How are you going to do it?" asked Pete, trying to make his voice sound casual.

"We're going to take two planes up there," said the Big Shot. "I got the planes in my private airport up in the Westchester hills. You and Lefty are going to be in one; me and Joey Kusak, my private pilot, in the other. You, being a war pilot, are going to have the pleasure of turning the trick so's you can get revenge on the guys who did you dirt.

"Me, I'm going to be on hand watching you work, to see how good you are and to see that the job is handled right. Lefty, here, is going to be sitting right behind you in the rear seat to see that you don't get cold feet. We trust you, all right, all right, but this is your first job with us and I made my success by not taking chances. Lefty is going to have a parachute on; you ain't. So if you try to slip us the double-ex, he can blow your brains all over upper New York State and then jump overboard, leaving me to finish the job, see?"

Pete stared at him through unbelieving eyes. Mr. Sturdy had prepared Pete for many things, but not for this. Here, so close to Times Square that a single shout from the window would bring a traffic policeman to the scene, a mass murder was being planned that would rival the St. Valentine's Day massacre! And he, Pete Hargrave, ex-war pilot, ex-transport pilot, a man who believed that the air was a clean place for decent men, was being invited—no, commanded—to take part!

If that man they called the Big Shot hadn't been sitting there squinting at him with eyes that were as cold and dead as those of a buzzard, Pete might have believed that he was losing his mind, or, perhaps, waking up from some hag-ridden nightmare that was fantastic as it was impossible. This was the sort of thing that one read about in the newspapers; that always happened to somebody else, never to one's own self!

But he couldn't look at the Big Shot and at Lefty without slowly realizing that this thing was a fact; that in a few hours he would be refusing to commit this mass murder and would be calmly and expeditiously shot to death.

Even that wouldn't matter if, in the meantime, he could find some way to prevent the crashing of the transport, some way to send this whole mob of underworld rats to the flaming hell

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they had been cheating for so long. But he couldn't accomplish that by running amuck until felled by the spitting fire from Lefty's automatic. Now was the time for brains, not action. Action could come later when he had figured a way out of the mess.

The Big Shot had risen from his chair and was now pouring a moderate drink from a cut-glass carafe. He swallowed the liquor in a single gulp, not bothering to offer any to the two who watched him.

"Lefty," he said, "show the bird a bed. He ain't got long to sleep, anyway. And," he added with a wolfish smile, "you better get one of the torpedoes to sit up with him for fear of his walking in his sleep. If he gets to walking, or making a fuss, in his sleep, have them do anything necessary to quiet him down. You understand?"

Lefty's heavy-lidded eyes met those of his leader in a glance of complete understanding.

"Leave it to us, boss," he cracked. "We'll see he's quiet."

CHAPTER V.

INTO THE SKIES.

LONG, oblique rays of morning sunlight slanted down on the private airport as the big black car lurched through the gate in the barbed-wire fence. The dark-faced young man who swung open the gate stared closely at the occupants of the car, nodded and removed his right hand from a bulging pocket.

Pete Hargrave, sitting in the tonneau between the Big Shot and Lefty, glanced at the small hangar before whose open door two swift-looking monoplanes stood with their engines slowly ticking over. On each side of the field the rolling hills of northern Westchester County swept away in neat, orderly formation, making a well-concealed pocket for this airport far from the concrete highways which radiated fan-wise, north and east, out of New York.

"Nice little place, huh?" smiled the Big Shot, surveying the scene.

"Yes, except that you'll need good flyers to take ships off," nodded Pete. "There'll be a lot of bumps off those hills."

"I got good flyers," the gang leader assured him. "You and Joey Kusak. And while I think of it," he added, with a sudden harshness in his voice, "the plane you're going to fly is in good shape, so don't make any mistakes by not being able to take off, or anything like that."

Pete said nothing. With every revolution of the motor car's wheels hope of preventing this massacre seemed to drift farther into the background. Of course he wasn't going to help to bring down that transport. At the last moment he'd dive straight into the ground, if need be, carrying Lefty with him down to Hades. But that wouldn't be enough.

The Big Shot would be in the air, too, ready to shoot the transport down if he, Pete, failed. And if, perchance, the Big Shot wasn't able to bring this Montreal ship down in a crash, he would simply wait and cause some other disaster, to-morrow, or the next day or the day after that. And if Pete were dead, who would stop a swift succession of tragedies? Certainly not the police; the Big Shot appeared to have covered his trail too well. Slick was dead and Mr. Sturdy obviously had not known which of the several important racketeers was preying on the transport operators.

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There had not been a single moment since leaving the Big Shot at four in the morning when Pete could have escaped to warn Mr. Sturdy, or even Red Henderson, of the impending disaster. They had not even permitted him to be alone while he slept. One of the grim-eyed card players had been detailed to sit at the foot of his bed, armed and watchful, while another sat in a chair just outside the door.

And when he had awakened from the sleep of utter exhaustion, his two vigilant guards had not left his side for a single instant, even while he had breakfasted with the Big Shot and Lefty. It had occurred to him to cut loose and try to snatch the gun out of the pocket of one of his guards and to take the one-in-a-thousand chance of killing them both and thus getting away.

He wasn't afraid to die, but he hadn't dared risk it, remembering that, for the present, he, alone stood between the Big Shot and the deaths of all those who were flying to Montreal that morning in the big air liner.

ABRUPTLY the car came to a stop beside the nearer of the two idling planes. A saturnine young man dressed in flying clothes, came to the side of the car. His eyes were weak and shifty, his forehead unpleasantly low. He had a habit of moistening his lips with his tongue as he spoke.

"Ships ready, Joey?" snapped the Big Shot.

"Yes, Mr. Rocco," replied the pilot.

Mr. Rocco! That, Pete knew instantly, would be Luigi—"Louie"—Rocco who, in eighteen months, had machine-gunned his way to the very pinnacle of gangdom. An almost legendary figure, this Rocco, whose name was in the newspapers in connection with every gang slaying, but whose money and power had spun a spiderweb of political wires that had, so far, effectively protected him from prosecution.

His name was almost as well known as that of the President; his wealth almost equal to that of the motor car millionaires. He had once been a beer-runner for a Chicago gangster, but, having ambition, he had turned a Thompson gun on his employer and cut him into small bits. Having once learned the potency of a Tommy gun as a tool for progress, he had swiftly shot his way straight to the top of his profession in the Middle West and had then moved to New York where, in the course of a year, he had paid for the burials of all his rivals.

"This 'll be your bus," snapped Rocco, motioning with his thumb toward the nearer monoplane. "Lefty, get the Tommy guns and come on."

Had it not been for the terrible mission he was engaged upon, Pete's hands would have longed to grab the joy stick of the sleek little plane and to zoom her into the air. She was of the latest type, motor cowl, wheel pants—Rocco had apparently spared no expense to obtain the best ships possible for his work.

"Now listen, kid," snapped the Big Shot, coming to a stop just beside the tapering wing. "Don't try any monkey business with me on this trip. I don't think you're that much of a damn fool, but I been surprised before now. Just start anything funny and you'll get your conk blown off. Play the game right and I'll let you into the swellest home on Easy Money Street.

"Listen; a few weeks ago I gave this flying racket a big laugh, see? Now I don't even smile at it. It's the soft-

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est business there ever was. If it can do all I think it can, I'm buying twenty-thirty more planes, see? We'll fly booze and dope in from Canada and Mexico and Cuba. We'll fly out over the water and knock the devil out of the punks who are running hootch in in sea-skiffs.

"Why, with this flying stuff we can make millions, see, and if you play the darn thing right with me I'll make you my chief pilot and pay you more jack than you ever saw in your life. Joey, here, is a good kid, but he's a dope and I can't trust him to take responsibility. That's why you're in soft. But I got to see how you behave in action to know whether you got the goods or not, see?"

He took a parachute pack out of Lefty's hands and began to climb into the harness. Lefty and the other pilot, Joey, were already buckling on the thigh and shoulder straps of their own parachutes.

"Next time you hop," said Rocco, evenly, "you get one of these 'chutes, see? But this time we ain't taking any chances with you. Give me my Tommy gun, Lefty." He took the clumsy two-handled weapon from the hands of his chief gunman and began to walk toward the second ship.

Then, turning back for a last word: "Head straight up the Hudson, Hargrave. That's the way the Montreal plane flies. We'll be half an hour ahead of her. When Lefty gives you the order, circle around and wait for her. Then, when she comes, dive close past her and give Lefty plenty of chance to put the slug on her. And if you don't keep close to me, or if you happen to have a forced landing, see, it will be just too bad. Remember, Lefty's got a Tommy gun and a 'chute and he's got orders to use them both first and ask questions later. S'long."

TWO silent mechanics stood by to pull the wheel chocks. Pete, feeling as if an icy hand were clenched about his heart, obeyed Lefty's curt motion to climb into the forward cockpit. The gunman, encumbered by his back-type parachute pack, climbed awkwardly into the rear cockpit and accepted the ugly little machine rifle passed up to him by a third mechanic. Pete's hand reached for the throttle, but Lefty reached forward and tapped him on the shoulder. Pete turned around and glanced back. Lefty's heavy-lidded eyes were bright with malevolence.

"Kid," he said, "I don't like you. You're too fresh. There ain't nothing I'd like better than to put this gun against your backbone and let you have the whole clip. Jumping out in the 'chute's no worse than diving off'n a high springboard. So if you want to live, rat, just mind your step."

The other plane roared full-out and trundled away over the short grass. Pete made no reply to the gunman's threat; he just turned forward and slapped the throttle. Rocco's plane was already off. Good ships, these. What a pity, Pete reflected, that they were being put to such use! These flying gangsters were fouling the whole sky.

Once, aërial enemies had been chivalrous foes. Pete remembered the sharp stab of regret he had felt when those two Jerry planes had begun to spin down to the ground. They were enemies, but good eggs, those Jerries. Now it was different. He could knock down one of those gangster planes and laugh while it ripped down to eternity!

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The sharp, spine-jarring hammering of tires against ground suddenly ceased. Pete held the little ship level for an instant, gathering flying speed, then pulled hard back and took a deep breath of relief as she screamed straight up in a vertical zoom. A good little ship, yes. A wonderful ship! Again he leveled out, glancing around the blue-green bowl of sky and earth for Rocco's plane. There it was, just to the left, straightening out over the hilltops to head northward. Viciously Pete kicked his rudder pedal and swung his stick to the right. This was the last lap, and he had thought of no certain way to prevent catastrophe.

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE DUEL.

AT eight thousand feet, two silvery monoplanes droned through a cloudless sky, swinging in long, slow circles, back and forth, around and around. Beneath them, and to every side, forests stretched from horizon to horizon like a vast, billowing carpet. The bright green tree tops swept from valley to hilltop in long, undulating waves, incredibly soft-looking, unbroken except for tiny flashes of rivers and lakes that resembled bits of mirrored glass flung heedlessly from a giant's hand.

Pete Hargrave, anxiously glancing at the dragging hands of the panel clock, felt as a condemned murderer must feel as he sits in the death chair and waits for the executioner to throw the switch. Eleven o'clock. The big transport was due at any moment. It was a perfect day for flying; she would be on time to the last tick of the second hand.

Seventy-five yards off his right wing tip, Rocco's plane cruised slowly along, the two helmeted heads in her cockpits turned toward the southern rim of the corrugated horizon. Twice, now, Pete had eased his own ship over toward the companion plane, desperately planning to lock wings with her and chance everything that the transport might be saved.

But once Joe Kusak had swerved hastily away; on the second attempt Lefty, in the rear cockpit, had jabbed the muzzle hard into Pete's back and motioned for him to keep at a safe distance.

He was the first to sight her. A tiny silvery dot against the green of the forests, she was flying far, far below the two ships who were awaiting her. Straight across that hill to the southward she droned her way, turning neither to right nor to left in her arrow-straight course toward Montreal, concerned only with her exact schedule, fearing nothing but the ordinary hazards of aërial navigation. Instantly, giving no sign that he had seen the oncoming transport, Pete banked over and turned to the eastward as if in search for her in that direction.

But Rocco's pilot had seen her, too. His arm was pointing straight southward toward that flashing silver dot. A hard, round something jarred against Pete's spine. He looked back. Lefty was scowling malignantly. The jerk of his thumb toward the low-flying transport left no doubt as to his meaning.

Pete shook his head in refusal. Lefty's forefinger whitened at the knuckle as he began to squeeze the trigger of the squat little Thompson gun. Rocco's plane pivoted forward on its axis and went hurtling down toward the transport. With sudden in-

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spiration Pete grinned and nodded. He turned around to face forward.

He drew a long, deep breath and threw all his weight on the stick, shoving it as far forward as it would go. With a swoop that caught at the pit of his stomach the little ship nosed over and plummeted downward like a falling projectile. Down she roared, her engine screaming full-out, while Pete held the stick jammed against the crash pad on the instrument board.

Wind shrieked through wires and struts. The plunging plane vibrated in every inch of her structure as her terrific speed increased. The pointer on the air speed meter crawled across the dial, indicating 180 miles an hour, then 200, then 210. Would she stand it? Pete doubted it, but it didn't much matter.

The hub-shaped cylinders of the husky radial engine pointed directly toward that soft spread of velvety forest below. Now, still answering that thrust-forward stick, her bow began to swing under, curving around into the second quarter of an outside loop. Pete's body was sagging against his safety belt as the mighty pull of centrifugal motion began to add its weight to the forces of gravity.

The wide-webbed fabric of the safety belt was cutting into his thighs. If those steel loops should break he'd go hurtling out into space like a stone from a slingshot. The vibration was terrific. It didn't seem possible that the ship could hold together under a strain she had not been built to withstand.

STILL holding the stick down with his left hand, Pete braced his right hand against the padded cowling in front of him and pushed himself around in his seat. Now they were upside down, the hammering engine trying to lift them up over the outer edge of the reversed loop. Queer, his body should be so reluctant to move against the pressure! He could scarcely turn his head and shoulders to face the enemy in the rear seat. There!

Lefty, his reddened face frozen in convulsive horror, was hanging there in the rear cockpit, one hand clutching the cowling, the other gripping the stock of the Thompson gun. His whole body sagged down until his shoulders and chest showed above the cowling. His mouth was open; his screams were blanked out in the thundering roar from the engine. The muzzle of the Thompson gun was just above the scoop-shaped windscreen of the rear cockpit.

With all the strength of his healthy body Pete pushed himself against his own back rest, reached out and snatched the muzzle. Lefty's hand came loose. The centrifugal force of the outside loop tore the deadly weapon out of Pete's grip. It went whirling off into the empty air, cartwheeling as it described its long, graceful parabola toward the ground.

Now the plane was climbing in a long, upside-down curve toward the top of her loop. Pete turned swiftly in his seat, stamped on the rudder pedal, and rolled the plane over into an awkward, sideslipping Immelmann. Then she was diving again, diving right-side up, thundering down toward two ships 2,500 feet below.

Pete's eyes glinted as he saw that the transport was still in the air. Somehow she had avoided that first deadly plunge of Rocco's ship. She was flying at right angles to her former course; Rocco's monoplane was below her, zooming up to return to the attack.

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Pete crouched deep beneath his cowling as his little plane streaked down at Rocco's. He knew Lefty had an automatic in his shoulder holster. He, Pete, must live until he had finished Rocco. Then to the deuce with everything! Down he roared like an eagle dropping for the kill. The transport plane mushroomed in size with amazing speed.

Pete caught an instant's glimpse of two white faces turned up at him from the pilot's cockpit. He saw her skid around out of his way as if her crew feared that he, too, was an enemy.

He jerked at his stick as Rocco's ship flashed up on her other side. He saw Rocco, sitting in the rear cockpit, squinting down the black length of his Thompson gun. A blinking stream of crimson flickered out toward the transport. And then Pete's ship hurtled straight into a thin gray line of sulphurous tracer smoke as she slammed down between the gun and its huge, helpless target.

The joystick swung under Pete's steady hand as he banked around to charge straight at Rocco. Something crashed against his head. He slumped in his seat while the whole world spun around in great sickening circles.

Instinctively he reversed controls and rolled the ship over on her back. His brain cleared, leaving only a dull ache. He looked around. Lefty, hanging head down, was clutching the cowling with both hands. His automatic was hooked by the trigger guard on one finger, useless until he removed that hand from the cowling.

Where was Rocco? There, over to the right. From his upside down position Pete could see the monoplane's underbelly; could see Rocco and the pilot peering over the cowling. The transport was a mile away, now, racing for safety to the eastward. Well, that was that.

He had saved her for the moment, now he must finish the job. He, Pete Hargrave, branded as a drunk, as an escaped convict, must save a ship of the same company that had disgraced him! His mind seemed fuzzy. It was hard to think. But it wasn't so hard to act. He knew what he must do; his hands and feet acted automatically.

HIS ship half-rolled, shrieking up and over in a breath-taking, curving dive. Rocco's pilot saw what was coming. He nosed over in a sudden paroxysm of fear while Rocco held his machine gun by its two handles and held his finger hard on the trigger. Pete's ship ripped through that delicate cobweb of tracer smoke, plunging straight toward the top wing of the lower plane. Pete's hand was light on the stick, his feet steady on the pedals. His jaw muscles stood out like knotted cords under the bronze of his cheeks.

The propeller of his ship bit into that smooth wing of Rocco's plane. The engine smashed down through the fabric. The two ships seemed to become one mass of crumpled fabric, splintered struts and snake-like wires.

In an instant the roaring of the two engines and the rending crash of the collision had died out into silence. There was no sound in the whole world but the grating rubbing of linen against linen, metal against metal. And, far away in the distance, the faint throbbing of the transport's engine.

Pete heard himself laughing hysterically. The blamed planes weren't falling. Defying all laws of gravitation, they were just hanging there in the air as if suspended by a titanic and invisible sky hook. And in that mass of wreckage, almost near enough for

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him to touch, were two of the deadliest figures in gangdom. He, Pete Hargrave, had done it. Done it for a company which had caused him to be blacklisted.

No, he hadn't; he'd done it for a yellow-headed baby, who had laughed at him from a cabin. And he found himself laughing at that, too. Then, quite slowly, the little tent of tattered fabric in which he was sitting began to sag. Instantly his pilot's instinct snapped him back to sanity. His laughter was extinguished like an electric light cut off at the switch.

He thumbed the safety belt and pushed himself up in his cockpit. His head thumped against a crumpled bit of wing. He bent his head, braced his broad shoulders against the wreckage which had closed him in like the cover of a box and pushed. Then his head and shoulders were out in the open air.

The horizon was slowly wheeling around, swinging past at an ever-increasing speed. The wreck was beginning to spin. He became aware that some one was screaming in a high-pitched voice whose shrill overtones were cutting into his eardrums like a probing needle. The sound was coming from beneath a fluttering piece of wreckage right beside him.

He glanced down toward the ground. It was coming up at him with the speed of an express train. Yet, somehow, he did not feel hurried. Well, why should he feel hurried? There was nothing to do but to wait until the crash came that would end everything. But all the while his strong hands were tearing at that flapping linen that covered the man who was still screaming so shrilly. The torn wing-covering came loose in his hands. There was Lefty, his mouth absurdly open, his face the color of old paper. And he was still screaming. His automatic had disappeared. He'd have no use for it now.

It was difficult to stay aboard the wreck. She was spinning so that it was almost impossible to remain upright. Pete, yanking at Lefty's shoulders, wondered how he was able to stay aboard at all. It was because his leg was caught between two crisscrossed struts; that was why. He couldn't get out if he wanted to.

Now he had dragged Lefty up out of the shattered rear cockpit; was holding him erect. The man was crazy, beating at Pete's face and shoulders with hands that slapped instead of punched.

THE ground was close now. It wouldn't be long. Pete's eyes focussed themselves on the crossed webbing of Lefty's parachute harness. There might be a chance. He'd better do something, anyway. A puff of hot smoke enveloped him, made him choke and gasp for air. A crimson streak of flame raced up along the oil-soaked fabric, licking up at his leg —the leg that was tangled in the wreckage.

That wouldn't do. Fire was the only thing in the world he was really afraid of. He'd seen too many buddies go down in flames. Funny, how time was stretching out. Had it been instants, or hours, since the two planes had crashed? His brain was now utterly clear. There seemed to be plenty of time to think things out.

Well, there was one remote chance—or there would be, if that darned fool Lefty would stand still and stop squalling. With exact savagery Pete put all the strength of his arm, shoulder and back muscles into a terrific uppercut to Lefty's chin. The man sagged limply. Pete ran his own left arm up

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under the cross belts of Lefty's 'chute harness and hooked his fingers hard around the webbing. Not much time now. The trees were reaching up for the falling wreckage.

With his right hand Pete reached for the release ring over Lefty's heart. He jerked the ring and wrapped his right arm around Lefty's waist.

There was a report like a pistol shot. A blur of white silk snapped out from Lefty's parachute pack. Pete strained every muscle to hold on. His ears were filled with the staccato rustling of fabric.

There was a jerk which threatened to tear his muscles to pieces. A white-hot streak of agony rippled through his pinioned left leg, running up his side and clear into his brain. He felt himself being whirled into space, conscious of nothing but the strain on his two arms and the blinding pain in his leg. Now he was swaying back and forth, swinging like a gargantuan pendulum. He and the unconscious Lefty were clear of the mangled planes which were spinning down like a fantastic top, leaving a long corkscrew of acrid black smoke behind them.

It wasn't hard to hold on now. His left arm was wrapped in those tight belts, his right arm securely wrapped around the other's body. But he felt very sick. He wondered if his leg was still in that spinning wreck down there. There was no feeling below the waist except sheer agony. He twisted his head and looked down. No, his leg was still attached to his body, but oddly twisted.

There was a reverberating crash as the trees opened up, enveloped the falling wreckage and closed again, leaving only a drifting column of fire-shot smoke to mark the spot where the two ships had landed.

Now the trees were rushing up toward Pete. He tried to cross his ankles so he wouldn't straddle a limb. A soft twig of greenery brushed upward across his face. A heavy branch scraped up along his body. He felt Lefty slip away from him; felt himself plunging downward, bouncing from limb to limb. And then all the lights in the world went out.

HE tried to brush away a shaft of light that was blazing down into his eyes. Ether. It was in his nostrils; it was in his throat. He knew what it was because he had once awakened in a hospital in France. He set his mind to snapping out of the formless dreams that were whirling through his head. The way to do that was to open his eyes. He opened them.

"How do you feel?" That was a familiar voice, but he couldn't remember where he'd heard it.

"Like the deuce," he said thickly. "Go away!"

The ensuing silence was good. It would have been easy to slip down into those dreams again, but Pete kept his eyes open and fought against the mists in his brain. Slowly he began to remember. That white parallelogram he was looking at was a ceiling. There, to the right, was a window through which the sun was blazing. He turned his eyes away from the glare and looked straight into a pair of bright black eyes beneath a shock of white hair. After a while he remembered where he had seen that face. It was difficult, because it hadn't been smiling then.

"Hello, Mr. Sturdy," he said at last. "I fell through a laundry mangle. If they'll starch and iron me, I'll be all right!"

Those black eyes were kind. Pete

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hadn't realized that Mr. Sturdy could look so nice and friendly. He had seemed hard-boiled.

"Is this a hospital?" Pete asked.

"Yes. You're at Lake Placid. You've been unconscious since noon and it's almost sunset now. I came up here by plane as soon as word came through to New York. A game warden saw the fight and your fall."

"Did they take my leg off?" asked Pete, anxiously.

"You're too tough to lose a leg," said Mr. Sturdy reassuringly. "You were delirious when they got you here and when you were coming out of the ether, too. You said a lot of things, the doctors told me, that match up with other things I've known or suspected. You talked about Louie Rocco. Is he one of the birds whose bones were found in the burned wreck?"

"Yes," nodded Pete. "He and a fellow called Lefty were running the racket against the transport."

"We identified Lefty Burke," said the executive, slowly. "His neck was broken by the branch of a tree. But who was the other man in the plane, Rocco's pilot?"

Pete nodded weakly.

"It's a good thing for the world Rocco was killed," said Mr. Sturdy. "We might have had a job convicting him. He was rich, powerful and unscrupulous. He might have beaten us somehow and gone free to continue his rotten career. But now he's out for good. It was a fine job, old man. Now listen, Pete; you're going to get your bonus of five thousand dollars for breaking up that racket, and you're going to get your salary until you are able to work again. Mr. Blackwood, president of the Hudson Air Lines, is flying up here at this minute to see you. I've just been talking to him on the phone. And—"

PETE held up his hand. Something had been whirling through his mind that needed an answer.

"Mr. Sturdy, did you find out whether the Hudson people had been paying Rocco his protection money or not?"

The insurance man smiled grimly.

"Yes, we've learned about that, too. Mr. Blackwood said they had been giving the money every week to their operations manager, Red Hamilton, who was conducting the negotiations with Slick Rosen, Rocco's collector. But we've just learned, through what you said in your delirium, that Red Hamilton hadn't been paying it to Rosen. He'd been pocketing it, planning to run away with it when he had made a nice little pile.

"That's why he blamed you for the wreck, Pete. He didn't dare blame the gangsters, or they'd have learned he was double-crossing them and would have bumped him off. So he said you were drunk. Right at this minute he's at the police station, where they're probably sweating a confession out of him. And Mr. Blackwood, president of the company, is flying up here to offer you Hamilton's job."

He stopped and looked down at Pete, who smiled up at him.

"Well," said Pete, "it'll be good handling a big bus again. A heap better than sitting in Bryant Park." His eyelids drooped with weariness. With an effort, he lifted them and winked up at the older man.

"It sure pays to advertise!" Pete said distinctly. Then with a sigh of relief, he closed his eyes and went peacefully to sleep.

THE END.

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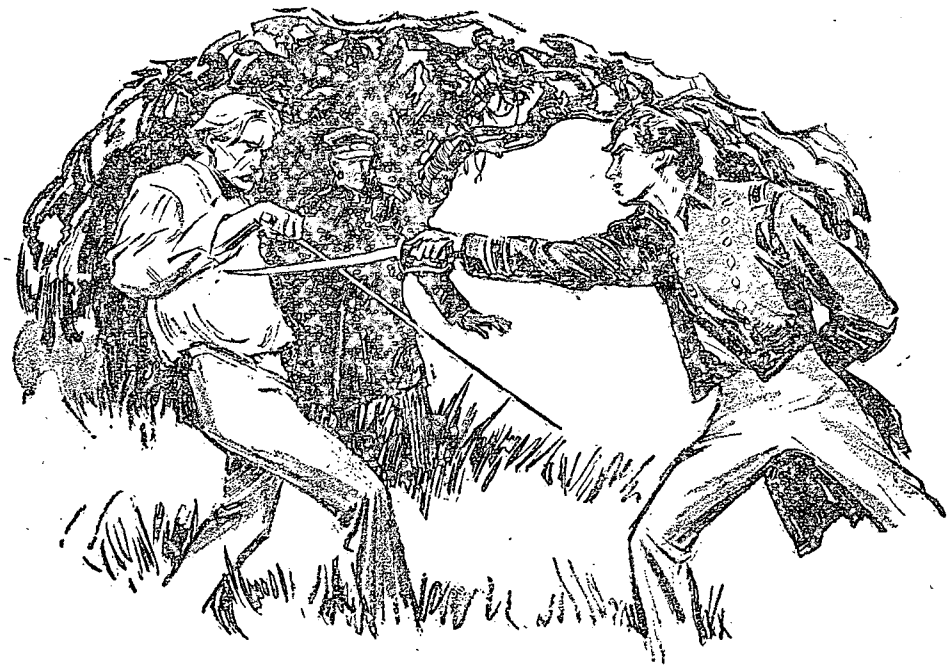

Codd realized that the don was playing with him

Swordsmen of Florida

It was a noble prize that Captain Zebulon Codd had captured in the swaggering buccaneer who called himself Black Hugh, yet the Navy captain was soon to regret that he had not hung the schemer on that little isle in the Gulf of Mexico

By CHARLES MINNIGERODE MAIGNE
Author of "For Country," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

CAPTAIN ZEBULON CODD, of the United States Navy, sails his schooner, the Cormorant, into the tiny harbor of the islet of San Cristobal Cayo, off the coast of Florida, in search of pirates. Seconded by his boatswain, Mullins, and followed by his men, he is about to attack a band of duelling Spaniards. Fascinated by the swordsmanship of one of them, he tumbles out of his hiding place, into the midst of the group.

He discovers they are not pirates, but the owners of the islet: the elderly Don Luis Ambrosio de la Cordoba y Guerra; his son, Don Luis Segundon; and his daughter, Maraquita. Don Luis, while a loyal Spaniard, offers the hospitality of his *hacienda* to Codd and his men.

This story began in the Argosy for July 11.

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Codd falls in love with Maraquita, and is gladly welcomed by Don Luis as a prospective son-in-law. A short voyage of the Cormorant is climaxed by the capture of the pirate ship Bonanza, with its captain, Black Hugh, and Codd returns to Las Flores, the don's home.

A hunting trip is arranged for him by young Luis. Osceola, a Seminole Indian, is their guide, and Maraquita insists upon accompanying them. In a combat with a huge bear, Codd saves the lives of the other three. Don Luis urges Codd to give up his Navy commission and settle upon the islet with Maraquita as his bride. Codd finally agrees, stipulating that he will first take his pirate captive to Charleston, turn him over to the authorities, and resign.

As the two ships prepare to depart, Black Hugh gains the ear of Don Luis, and protests that he is a Spanish gentleman, a victim of circumstances who was captured by pirates and forced to join them. He says that the title of Black Hugh covers his real name, and as he whispers to the don, a startled look comes over the latter's face.

CHAPTER VI.

VILLAIN OR MARTYR?

IF Hugo's claims were true, what a noble fish Capitan Zeb-u-lon had caught! It was unthinkable that one of such exalted blood could descend to sordid crime. There must, in truth, be some mistake, Don Luis believed.

As the latter pondered, his instinctive loyalty to anything of Spanish origin challenged by Hugo's disclosure of the name he claimed as his, the buccaneer chief again permitted his eyes to rest upon Maraquita. In them, burning with latent fires, lay a blending of appeal and automatic, raw appraisal of the woman's beauty.

A sense of disquietude crept into Maraquita's consciousness, a mingling of vague alarm, which was personal to herself, and an abstruse horror of possible injustice, which was personal to Hugo. Her father's reaction to disclosure of Hugo's alleged secret had not been lost upon her. In matters of precept and policy she and her father thought as one; it was bred in the bone. Instinctive humanity and quick sympathy, easily aroused, were common heritage.

"I have the honor to inform you that Captain Codd is to become my son-in-law," Don Luis said. "I am therefore privileged to speak to him intimately upon this subject, which I will do. Captain Codd is a just man. I cannot say what his decision may be, but in any event I can guarantee that he will go to any length to assure you at least a fair and impartial trial.

"Be of good hope, *señor*. I bid you God-speed. *Adios, señor.*"

Don Luis bowed to the pirate, laid a warning hand upon Maraquita's arm. Once again, with grandiloquent sweep Black Hugh bent double in acknowledgment of the old Spaniard's words. Young Luis bowed, in turn. Hugh matched the gesture; capped it with elaboration.

He then paused for a long moment, his black, trespassing eyes invading Maraquita's. Bending low before her he brushed the very sand in the profundity of his obeisance, the form of the act and attitude conveying a homage such as that offered only to royalty.

For an instant the girl gazed at Hugo as though fascinated. Then, in a sort of panic she remembered her

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manners, bobbed a hasty curtsy, turned away.

An Indian courier from the mainland approached Codd. From his shirt he drew a sealed document, and handed it to Zebulon.

"It is for you," he explained. "From the great waters on the other side of my country came a ship of your nation, which stopped near the settlement of Ta-miami. The sea-chief bargained for one of my people to find you and bear you this word. It is delivered. Farewell, my brother."

Zebulon Codd looked up from the unopened communication.

"Thank you, my friend. It is some sort of an order from my chief."

Codd experienced a queer sensation of imminent adversity as he broke the seal and opened the document. A deep foreboding of disaster crept over him. He read the order.

"BY the way, my boy," began Don Luis, who had been politely waiting, "there is something important I must speak to you about. Come with me for a moment." With assurance he took Codd's arm to draw him aside.

Zebulon scarcely seemed to hear him. The officer stared in dismay at the open communication in his hands. As again he read the copperplate text, almost wolfing the words, the blood ebbed from his face, then rushed back, suffusing cheeks and brow and throat in an angry crimson.

The don, concerned with his thoughts and mentally formulating how best to broach the subject, paid no heed to Zebulon's consternation, for he saw none of it.

"My son"—Don Luis paused to look with affectionate eyes upon Zebulon—"for you are to be my son, and I may speak freely to you with the words of a father, I wish to save you from committing a grave error.

"Black Hugh—that is not his name, though I may not tell you what it really is—assures me that he happens to be in the company of these sea-robbers only through the most unfortunate accident. He was captured, and because he was a seasoned navigator they forced him to purchase his life at the price of sailing their vessel."

Zebulon Codd looked dully and uncomprehendingly toward the don. He pulled himself together and with some difficulty forced a smile.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I was thinking—of something else. What was it you said?"

He made himself listen as Don Luis marshaled his beliefs and presented his statement of them.

By now, in his fealty to everything pertaining to his nationality, Don Luis had become quite convinced that Hugh Negro was the piteous victim of untoward circumstances. And this, with conviction, he crisply proceeded to state to Zebulon:

Hugo had been a gentleman-adventurer who had embarked in trade. Of noble blood, considerate, loved by all—he had been a man among men.

Peacefully sailing in the Caribbean one day, a strange craft had descended upon him, flying an inverted ensign of distress. In the goodness of his heart Hugo had hove-to, to render aid, when over his side poured a horde of bloodthirsty men, who captured his ship, stripped it clean, slaughtered the crew to a man.

Their navigator having been killed, the pirates offered Hugo his life if he would sail their vessel. Perforce, Hugo had accepted; and at the time of his capture by Codd he was stealthily

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attempting to turn the ship over to any proper authority.

Hugo's act and plan had been one of nobility. It could not possibly have been anything else . . . for Hugo himself was a noble, and of the finest blood of Spain.

"Therefore, my son," the don concluded, "it must be apparent to you that Don Hugo . . . I may not tell you his name, as I said before . . . is deserving of the highest consideration. I suggest, therefore, that you release him at once. Your government will undoubtedly reward you for your discernment, and Don Hugo for his gallantry."

ONLY by an intense effort had Zebulon given close heed to the don's words. Now, despite his own grave disturbance, he was compelled to smile.

"Who told you all this, Don Luis?"

"Don Hugo himself."

"Don Hugo is the greatest liar unhung."

The don flushed, drew himself up. His eyes began to smolder.

"What's that, Captain Codd? . . . Liar? I have told you what I believe; I would not believe a lie. Therefore, when you brand Don Hugo a liar, you also impugn my honor. I demand instant retraction of the term!"

Codd looked bewildered. "Oh, see here, sir! . . . Wait a moment, Don Luis. Good heavens, you're the last man on earth whose word I would doubt.

"I assure you, sir, there was meant not the slightest reflection upon you. But I happen to know Hugo's history backward. We've had it in the Navy for months—ever since we've been trying to get him. He's of a good family—a Spaniard—yes; but for all that, a dyed-in-the-wool scoundrel. He has a long prison record. He is guilty of murder and piracy and a hundred other crimes for which he must pay. I beg you, Don Luis, don't let him deceive you. He is an arch-criminal. F o r g e t him, sir. Don't give him another thought. He's gulled you—played on your sympathies!"

The old Spaniard's features set into hard lines. His quick anger flared, unreasoningly. His black eyes bored with steely glint into Zebulon's. When he spoke, his words crackled.

"Am I a puling child to be wheedled? . . . An old fool to be hoodwinked? . . . A dolt? . . . An idiot?"

In an ascending rage Don Luis launched into a stream of Spanish too rapid and pyrotechnic for Codd even remotely to grasp. The violence of the don's speech attracted the attention of all within range of his voice.

Young Luis, distressfully concerned by the volcanic eruption of his sire, hastened to the old man's side and attempted to quiet him, meantime staring helplessly at Zebulon in quest of an explanation of the outburst. The don's people, made apprehensive by the vehemence of the don's tirade, stood awkwardly about. Apparently, before now they had seen their lord in a rage; and at such moments they held him in wholesome fear.

The don's strident tones reached even to the *hacienda.* Maraquita appeared suddenly in the doorway, then ran swiftly down the pathway toward the house b e f o r e which her father stormed at her lover.

She came up to her brother, anxiously studying the faces of Codd and her father.

In a whisper she demanded: "What has happened, Luis? *Madre Santa!* What is wrong?"

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Luis helplessly shrugged his shoulders. It had all come out of a perfectly clear sky.

The old man's eyes flashed ancient fires as he poured upon Zebulon's bewildered head the vials of his wrath. The more wrought-up Don Luis became, the less Zebulon had to say. This, so far as the don's ire was concerned, but added fuel to the flames; until Maraquita began to fear that her father would lash himself into a stroke.

MEANTIME, silent though he had become, Zebulon Codd was only human.

Under the stinging whiplash of the don's language he commenced to grow restive and hot under the collar.

Maraquita sensed that Zebulon was about to flare up; human nature had almost reached its limit. Quickly she stepped to Zebulon's side, dropped a hand until it could clasp one of his, gave his a quick, warning squeeze. As Zebulon glanced sharply at her she implored him with her eyes. They plainly begged:

"Please don't say a word!"

Codd stared at the girl for a moment, while anger and discretion struggled within him for mastery. As Don Luis raved on, the girl's hand closed more imploringly about that of her lover.

All of a sudden Zebulon smiled, nodded.

Turning her back toward her father to mask her words, she hurriedly whispered:

"Thank you, Don Zeb-u-lon. Leave him to me, sweetheart. I know it must be only a tempest in a teapot!"

With cool assurance the girl crossed to her father, took him by an arm and gently laid silencing fingers across his lips. She murmured soothing words. The old don spluttered, turned severely upon her.

She smiled indulgently into his eyes and continued her calming tactics, urging him to go aside with her, that he might tell her all about it.

Gradually the white heat subsided. Maraquita gave her father no chance to talk. Every time Don Luis opened his mouth to speak, his understanding daughter beat him to the word; he could not string three words together into speech.

In a moment the old fellow gave in and Maraquita led him away, young Luis following them.

Zebulon Codd stood silently. He seemed stunned. One lingering, helpless glance at the family group as they walked away from him; then the unhappy officer reopened the document the Indian messenger had brought. It read:

U. S. S. Nantucket,
Flagship, Gulf Squadron.

Lieutenant Zebulon Codd,
U. S. Armed Schooner Cormorant,
In Florida Waters.

SIR:

I have the honor to advise you that information has reached the Department of State that a Mr. Luis Cordoba y Guerra, owner of and resident upon Las Flores Key, persists in a claim that this key is Spanish, and upon it flies the Spanish flag.

You are hereby directed to proceed with your ship to Las Flores Key and take possession of it in the name of the United States of America. The Spanish flag, if flying, will be formally lowered, and the national colors of the United States will be hoisted with due ceremony in its stead.

In addition, the present tenant of the key will be required by you to take the oath of allegiance to the United States. In the event of his refusal to take this oath, he and his personal household are

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to be deported upon your vessel to Havana, Island of Cuba, the nearest Spanish port.

By order of the Naval Secretary,
DWIGHT D. TOLLIVER,
Rear Admiral, U. S. Navy.

WHAT best to do? How least offensively to do whatever had to be done? . . . There was no escape for Captain Codd from execution of the arduous task laid upon him. Despite his intention to resign from the service, he was still an officer of the Navy.

But of all times, for this order to come just now!

In the light of Don Luis's tempestuous outburst, any official action taken by Zebulon in carrying out the orders of the admiral would be immediately misconstrued. He had no need even to speculate on the effect of the edict upon Don Luis. It was a foregone conclusion, accepted without the slightest hope of amelioration, that Maraquita's father would hold him accountable for the demand of his government, and visit upon him the unreasoning and searing anger of personal enmity. Soon he heard their footsteps approaching, Maraquita's and Don Luis's, clicking softly on the tiling which, nestled in turf, led from the gardens into the covered way. Unconsciously and with accelerated heartbeat he braced himself for the clash.

They entered the *patio,* and Zebulon Codd arose.

Don Luis stopped short at sight of Zebulon. For a long moment *hidalgo* and officer faced one another like two antagonists awaiting but the word to cross swords. Maraquita, her attitude and eyes beseeching, in wordless appeal prayed her father not to hesitate. He had made her a promise: his word could not be betrayed.

The tension broke. A smile, half-whimsical, half-apologetic, spread slowly over Don Luis's features. Suddenly with brisk step he strode forward, a hand outstretched to Codd.

"I ask your pardon for my heat, Zeb-u-lon. I was carried away. I was wrong. Forgive the shortcomings of an old man who loves his country perhaps too well. This wicked temper that lives in me is a treacherous devil. I know you meant no offense to me. Will you forgive?"

In sudden relief Codd seized and wrung the hand extended to him.

"Don't mention it, sir, I insist. I quite understand—and there is nothing to forgive. Maraquita knows . . ."

The girl's eyes brimmed with happy tears, through which she nodded approval to both men. Impulsively she caught an arm of each in hers and hugged them to her bosom. Don Luis cleared his throat.

"About Hugo," he began.

"Yes, sir . . .?"

"You have a duty to perform. I see that. He must go with you to Charleston for trial. But I believe his story. This will be a fair trial, Captain Codd?"

"Absolutely, sir. Naturally, I pay great deference to your wishes. Under our law no man can be held guilty until proven so. I assure you that I will do everything possible to enable Black Hugh to establish his innocence." Don Luis considered Zebulon closely, unsmiling. He seemed disposed neither to accept Codd's statements at full face value, nor to be willing—quite—to take open issue with him on the matter. A course of action flashed into his mind.

"Very well," he announced. "I must content myself with that assurance. But because I believe Hugo's

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story, and believing, wish to aid him, with your permission I will accompany you to Charleston for the trial. Is that agreeable to you?"

The critical moment had arrived. Codd recognized it. As execution of his country's decree with respect to Don Luis was inescapable, a conflict inevitable, there was now no excuse or reason for further delay. A crucial question had been put to him. It must be answered.

"Very agreeable, Don Luis. Nothing would please me more. There is a condition, though, first to be met. This order, sir, reached me to-day—through the Indian runner. It speaks for itself."

And in Don Luis's hands Zebulon Codd placed the admiral's communication, then stepped quietly back to await the outcome of its stern exaction.

CHAPTER VII.

HATRED FLARES!

THE don looked abruptly up from the paper. His English was none too good. The meaning he had seemed to extract from the copper-plate handwriting of the text could not possibly be right. He smiled vaguely, apologetically, at Codd and the girl.

"I do not quite understand," he said. He placed the letter in Maraquita's hands.

"Read it to me, my dear, and explain its meaning. Spanish should be the universal language. What is it all about?"

Young Luis breezed in, as the girl silently began to read the order. A glance had apprised the young don of the existence of comparative peace, and he was enormously relieved. With pleasant brevity he greeted Zebulon, then joined his father. The old don's concentrated attitude as he awaited Maraquita's translation became apparent to him, and Luis forebore to interrupt.

Twice, thrice, the girl read the order. Her face went deathly white and her breathing almost ceased. She raised frightened eyes to Zebulon, desperate, appealing. She dared not look at her father. Zebulon's eyes remained steadfastly fixed upon hers. In them was sorrow, love . . . and a resigned inflexibility of purpose. There was no dodging the issue.

Codd cleared his throat: there seemed to be a lump in it, somewhere. He forced the lump down.

"Read it aloud, please," he asked.

But Maraquita could not comply. Concerned now, conscious of some great impending crisis, young Luis took the letter from his sister's nerveless hands and quickly scanned it. He looked angrily up at Zebulon and a dull flush suffused his swarthy cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Luis," said Codd. "I have no alternative except to obey the order. Please tell your father."

In a tense voice, and sharp with animosity, young Luis instantly complied. The Spanish syllables crackled and hissed, in a crescendo of mounting ire. Luis blew up. Oddly enough, he became much more excited and violent than his father.

The old fellow, at first, could not quite comprehend that this thing could be directed at him. With unexpected restraint Don Luis attempted to calm his son. He turned to Codd, the letter now in his hands.

"This order . . . it is from your *almirante?*"

"Yes, Don Luis."

"But—he is in error. He has no right. He does not understand. Las Flores Cayo is Spanish soil."

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"I'm sorry, Don Luis. Our government holds otherwise. Las Flores is part of Florida, all of which has been acquired by proper treaty from your country."

"Absurd! . . . Ridiculous! See, now, Zeb-u-lon: When we go to Charleston we will explain the matter to them. Of course you will not obey any such idiotic command. You are one of us—or will be. This will be your own estate. You are going to resign from the Navy. Therefore this order must not be enforced. You will not attempt it, of a certainty!"

Zebulon had no command of language. In the stress of adversity he fell back upon mere repetition:

"I have no alternative, Don Luis. I must obey my orders."

SUDDENLY the old don's eyes became hot, smoldering with living fires. He strode across the intervening space until he squarely fronted the young officer. With wrathful, trembling forefinger he tapped the document in his hand.

"You mean . . . you will put this order into effect?"

"I must, Don Luis. I have no alternative."

"You? . . . whom I have taken into my home? Into my heart? Into whose hands I have agreed to give my daughter's life? Whom I have befriended? Loved? You . . . Zeb-u-lon Codd, who was to be my son?"

In the grim travail of the moment Codd turned appealingly to Maraquita.

"Make him understand!" he begged. "I had nothing to do with the order. I am a servant of the government. If I should ignore the order and refuse to execute it, there are a hundred others who would come down here to enforce it. Explain to your father: it is only a form. He has merely to take the oath of allegiance to the United States. There will be no interference with him. Everything here will be just as before."

Desperate tears leaped into Maraquita's eyes. She seized Zebulon's arm with her two hands, tensely clutching.

"Zebulon, Zebulon! This is terrible—terrible!"

Racked with sobs, she laid her head on Zebulon's breast. His arm wound guardingly about her, drawing her close. Don Luis touched him on a shoulder. Codd looked up at him. Don Luis stretched an arraigning arm toward the girl.

"You love her, do you not?"

"You know that, Don Luis . . . more than all the world!"

"I believe it, my boy. Then you will not—cannot—enforce this order."

Sadly Zebulon Codd shook his head in denial.

"I must."

Don Luis nodded. A sharp, spontaneous gasp burst from his lips, like the hiss of steam pent-up beyond the danger point.

"Margareta . . ." The don's voice cracked like a pistol shot: "Go to the house!"

The girl, with black despair, turned fearfully in Codd's arms to face her father. Codd broke in:

"Wait a moment, sir. This difficulty is none of my making. I regret it, as much as you do. Leave Maraquita out of it. She is promised to me. We love each other. Her place is with me, now and always."

Don Luis seemed not to hear.

"Margareta, go to the house."

"Father!"

For answer, Don Luis extended an arm toward the *hacienda*. His eyes ig-

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nored Codd. They bored, compellingly into his daughter's.

Deliberately Zebulon released the girl. In her decision between father and lover there must be no coercion, at least on his part. No word was spoken. Don Luis's arm demanded: Codd's hand appealed.

Heart-stricken, the girl looked imploringly from man to man The tension became unbearable. A great sob broke from Don Luis's daughter. Her sire's inflexible eyes burned with their command: the lifelong habit of obedience could not, in a moment, be overthrown.

Maraquita, in an abyss of misery, turned from them all and started toward the *hacienda.*

CODD walked to the *patio* gateway which led toward the beach. His men, the pirates in their midst, had formed ranks to return to the ships. Codd scanned the assembly.

"Mullins!" he called.

The boatswain reported. Some instinct warned him of a crisis and the old sailor stood before Codd, rigidly official. Don Luis and his son approached them.

"Mullins, you will march the crew to the flagstaff yonder. Bring my boat flag. You are to lower the Spanish colors. The men will pay them the courtesy of 'Present Arms.' You will then hoist our ensign, with similar formality. That is all. We are to take possession of Las Flores Key in the name of the United States of America."

A startled glance from Mullins flashed upon the two dons. They were white, stiff with shocked disbelief. In the sudden pallor of the two men their dark eyes blazed with deadly fire. Mullins saluted, turned and stalked away.

When the boatswain had joined the crew Codd reëntered the *patio.* In his manner was regret; no apology.

"It distresses me, Don Luis, that this duty has fallen to my lot."

Coolly and deliberately Don Luis walked up to Codd, then slapped him across the face. Zebulon's eyes blazed. Instinctively he drew back his arm to strike. Then he stood, immovable. On his suddenly white cheek the print of the don's fingers and palm glowed angrily.

Young Luis walked up to Codd. With deliberation equal to that of his father the young don slapped Zebulon. Instantly Codd knocked him down.

Don Luis imperturbably assisted his son to his feet. It was as though Zebulon's response was quite to be expected, a part of a formal routine.

Don Luis Senior spoke first:

"Will sunset be agreeable to you, Captain Codd?"

Codd was calm, with the calmness which results from sureness of self. This man was Maraquita's father: he was an old man, and about him had just come clattering the ruins of all that life had meant to him. Zebulon pitied him profoundly.

"Don Luis, it is impossible. I cannot fight you."

Young Luis pushed forward. His face still wore the fixed smile which was part of his code.

"Quite right," he said. "Besides, mine is the prior claim. Sunset, Captain Codd?"

Codd turned to regard young Luis. He shook his head in denial.

"Don't be foolish, Luis. I cannot fight you either."

Young Luis drew himself up. With devastating scorn he looked Codd over from foot to crown.

"I had thought, at least, Captain

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Codd, that you were a gentleman. Am I compelled to revise my estimate of you, sir? Must I now discover that you are a coward as well? A coward, sir? A poltroon? . . . a craven?"

Codd flushed.

"Very well, Luis. If that's the way you feel about it. . . I'll fight. And the sooner the better. Sunset will do very well."

"Ah. . . thank you. As to the meeting place. . . We will be secluded back of the great Eastern Dune. Our family graveyard is there. That, I presume, even your government will scarcely disturb. It should be a fitting place: the last of our heritage—which might have been yours."

Codd bowed. "Any place will do as well as another."

"At sunset, then?"

"At sunset."

CHAPTER VIII.

A DUEL IS FOUGHT.

A BLOOD-RED sun, filtered by the purpling haze of evening, hung low over the westward waters. Soon the sun would set, and a momentous day be ended.

Curiously the don's retainers collected about the green open space before the *hacienda*. Under arms, and in a hollow square about the corsairs, the crews of the vessels had marched solemnly to the staff from the peak of which flew the ensign of Spain. Evidently, thought the don's people, there was to be some kindly ceremony in honor of the flag and the nation for which it stood.

From the house the two dons emerged, one at either side escorting the girl Maraquita. Straight toward the flagstaff trudged the three. Just beyond the ranks of the sailors they halted. Instinctively the retainers of the house gathered behind their master.

In the midst of the hollow square stood Captain Codd. A nod to Mullins. The boatswain led a party of sailors to the foot of the staff. One carried the small boat flag of the captain's gig, rolled and in stops. Mullins released the halyards from the cleat, shook the lines free.

A low growl of protest from the don's people: a synchronic forward impulse. The outer rank of the sailor square whipped about to face the throng: cutlasses flashed bare, their brass guards gleaming in the late sunshine. Codd pushed through his men until he stood between them and the don's feverish and advancing retainers. He sharply held up a hand, warning them to stop where they were.

"Don Luis," he demanded, "halt your people. Let us have no bloodshed. They must not interfere . . . Be wise, and tell them to stay where they are!"

With frigid formality, Don Luis grudgingly bowed. In a flat, colorless voice, he bade his people to stop, summoned them to him.

Their voices hummed in a low ferment of wrath and outraged pride, like a swarm of yellowjackets newly aroused. Don Luis silenced them with a gesture. When the voices were still, the master of Las Flores, tall and straight and soldierly, turned toward the flag. He bared his head, and as he did, so did his people. Thus might a king go to his execution.

In a moment the ensign was down, replaced by Codd's boat flag. His voice arose gravely in the heavy silence:

"In the name of the United States of America I hereby take possession of Las Flores Key."

Again Codd pressed through the

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circle of his men and stood before Don Luis. In the old Spaniard's hand he laid the Spanish flag. There was no word of transmittal. The don bowed stiffly, accepted the banner.

With a slight effort Codd spoke:

"The first part of my orders has been executed, Don Luis. At least as a formality I must offer you opportunity to comply with the second demand of my government. Will you and your immediate household take the oath of allegiance to the United States of America?"

For a long moment Don Luis, Don Luis Segundon, and the girl Maraquita looked steadily into Codd's eyes. All the bitterness, all the contempt, all the deadly and implacable abomination of despair lay in those defiant glares. Then, without a word of reply, the dons faced about—the girl, too—turned their backs squarely upon the officer. The house of Cordoba y Guerra had made its answer.

Homeless and exile by his own choice, Don Luis summoned his people and led them back to the beautiful *hacienda* gardens, now no longer his own.

SUNSET. Don Luis and his son stood quietly waiting beside the chain railing of the graveyard, as Zebulon and Mullins rounded the shoulder of the dune and stopped before them. On the ground, unsheathed, reposed two long, gleaming rapiers with delicate tracery of gold inlay arabesqued on pommel and quillon. Beside the rapiers, in a velvet-lined mahogany box which was open, were two heavy pistols with octagonal barrels.

Don Luis and Don Luis Segundon gravely saluted. Punctiliously, Codd responded. Mullins cast a startled, questioning glance toward his captain; Codd nodded shortly. Mullins pursed his lips to whistle in surprise; thought better of it. Instead the old boatswain hitched at his trousers and took his stand by his officer. Now, as always, he was ready to fight beside or for his captain, quite satisfied, if necessary, to die with him.

Young Luis stepped forward, waved a hand toward the weapons.

"It is your choice of arms, Captain Codd. What is your preference?"

Regardless of how Luis might interpret the gesture, Zebulon could not proceed without a last attempt to avoid recourse to "The Code." The possibility of death at Luis's hand meant less than nothing to him; though obviously, Luis's purpose was a deadly one. But it was unthinkable that Zebulon Codd could deliberately strike down Maraquita's brother, even in self-defense.

"Don't misunderstand me, Luis, but I don't want to fight you. It is so unnecessary. Is there no other way?"

Luis gazed stonily back at Codd. The old 'don made no prompting move.

"Choose your weapon, Captain Codd. Which shall it be—the pistol or the cold steel?"

Resignedly Zebulon accepted the inevitable. The pistols.

The officer unbuckled the belt he wore; laid his sword aside. While Mullins, hawklike, watched every move, Don Luis measured out the powder and priming, tested the flints and the set of the battery.

The distance was ten paces. The antagonists were placed in position, back to back. At the word they were to turn and fire, while the don counted aloud:

"One—two—three."

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"Are you ready, Captain Codd?"

"Ready, Don Luis."

"Are you ready, Luis?"

"Ready, father."

"Then may God have mercy on your souls! One—two—three! Fire!"

Over the dunes and through the chapel where Maraquita had been praying the reverberation of two shots cracked like the lash of a distant whip. Maraquita sprang up, her pallid face gone gray. They had told her nothing of the meeting. The echo of the shots upon her startled consciousness supplied the first intimation of danger: her woman's intuition grasped the whole story.

She raced from the chapel.

On the field, Don Luis Segundon stood quietly gazing at Zebulon Codd. With his left hand Luis sustained his right. The right hand was shattered; blood dripped steadily from maimed fingers.

On the ground lay Luis's pistol.

LUIS'S shot had been the first, by a hair's breadth. Deliberately Codd had aimed for his opponent's hand, risking a fatal wound to himself by so doing. His aim had been true. Luis could scarcely believe his eyes. Codd stood before him, obviously untouched by Luis's fire.

Without comment Don Luis hastily bound up his son's hand, waving away Mullins, who had come forward to offer his assistance.

Codd wearily flung aside his empty weapon and with grave concern started toward the dons. Don Luis looked up, upraised a stern hand.

"One moment, pray, Captain Codd. Hold your position. It is my turn now!"

Don Luis ran to the rapiers, picked them up, laid them pommel-foremost across a forearm, and thrust the hilts toward Zebulon.

"You have seen fit to discard your *pistola, señor.* There remains only the *espadon.* They are the same. Choose!"

Distress flashed across Zebulon's features.

"No, no!" he exclaimed. "Don Luis! Isn't this enough? How can I fight you? How can I cross swords with Maraquita's father?"

The don was immovable. "Choose, Captain Codd."

"I refuse, absolutely!"

Don Luis plucked a rapier from the pair and tossed it abruptly to Zebulon's feet. The other rapier he took in hand, tried the blade.

"Defend yourself, *señor!*"

"No."

"Defend yourself, or I will spit you like a dog!"

Mullins's face purpled. He plunged forward, dragging his cutlass from its leathern scabbard.

"I'll be damned if you will! Spit me, if you can. Come on! Let's see you do it!"

The long, slender blade of the don flashed about. Mullins crouched on heavy guard, advancing on the don.

Codd's voice rang sharply, commandingly:

"Mullins—get back! Get back, I say!"

Codd kicked aside the rapier at his feet. He drew from its sheath the heavy Navy sword, which he had laid aside before meeting Luis.

"Don Luis," he said, "I know nothing of your fancy rapier work. I know nothing of your duelling formality. I do this under protest. But if you insist upon fighting I will use my own tools. Let's get it over with."

Saber versus epee: heavy-handed, cut-and-thrust against the lightning

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lick of a slim triangular sword as delicately balanced as a jeweler's scale! Two and a half feet of ponderous blade against four feet of dainty deadliness! The rough, battering, helter-skelter slash of crude field-fighting against the scientifically exact schooling of formal duello—the untutored blade outreached by eighteen dire inches!

Zebulon Codd was breathing heavily. Only by the utmost exertion had he kept from his breast the don's darting point. His hand was becoming numb and leaden, his parries slower and broader. A great weariness stole over him and his eyesight grew dim. Through the mist that floated before his eyes he could see Don Luis's face, set, dryly distorted with cold triumph. Codd knew, then, that his antagonist was playing with him.

HE saw the vicious grin widen on the face before him, a light of purpose flash into the steely eyes. There came a sharp wrench to his wrist; the fingers went numb. The haze before his eyes thickened into a mist that surged up and about, through which he glimpsed the needle point of the don's rapier leaping straight for his breast. There came upon him an impact that threw him off his balance. His sword hurtled through the air.

And out of the mist he heard Maraquita's voice:

"Father, you shall not!"

She stood before him, facing her father. Her arms were outspread. Halted at her young breast was the don's point.

Spent with w e a r i n e s s, Zebulon swayed for a moment, then put the girl aside, faced the don. His empty hands hung unresisting by his side.

"Shame, father, shame! Capitan Codd not even recovered from his wounds in the swamp! And you, a skilled swordsman!"

The don slowly dropped his point to the ground. With hard eyes, glittering still with the will to destroy, his glance bored into Maraquita's defiant and fearless ones. Neither moved, it seemed, for an æon. The don's lip curled.

"So," he exclaimed, "you have made your choice!"

Abruptly he tossed his rapier to the ground and turned away. Young Luis, resting his injured hand, joined him. Without a backward look they walked away, while Mullins glowered after them.

Even through his weakness a glad light leaped into Zebulon's face. He reached an eager hand toward the girl. She turned coldly, accusingly upon him.

"Don't touch me," she warned, "perhaps I have partly repaid our debt to you."

Deliberately she started away, toward the house.

"Maraquita," Codd cried, "where are you going? Come back!"

She paused, proud, stately and chill.

"No. To-morrow your ship will carry away to exile my father and my brother. I, too, am of the house of Cordoba y Guerra. I go with my father. This is the end, Captain Codd!"

Zebulon watched her until she disappeared from view. His face was like a graven image. The mist swept back, eddied up before him. He rocked uncertainly, like a tree about to fall. As his knees sagged under him Mullins ran to him and caught him in his arms. With frenzied hand the boatswain tore open the front of the uniform coat. The shirt beneath was soggy and warm.

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A red rose—the rose Maraquita had given him—fell out and whirled to the ground. The rose was redder than ever, and its petals glistened: It was bathed in blood. Luis's bullet had gone home, in the already wounded shoulder, and Zebulon Codd had given no sign of the hurt.

CHAPTER IX.

A BOLD ATTACK.

EIGHT bells: Midnight. Across the stilly night waters of the inlet, the Bonanza's bell, its mellow tones softened by distance, made answer to the Cormorant. The anchor watch on the warship's forecastle leaned negligently back against the knighthead and speculatively eyed the silver crump of a waning moon.

On the quarter-deck Zebulon Codd, too, purblindly gazed up at the moon.

He lay, bandaged, on a cot, one arm behind his head. His physical pains he rather welcomed as anodyne to a monotonous, incorporeal misery which throbbed relentlessly and insistently.

This hell-on-earth was to be especially gruelling for the next forty-eight hours: for the run to Havana would consume at least that time; and in his sight, under his charge, there would be Maraquita—a strange, a remote, an utterly ignoring, scorning Maraquita.

They were to come aboard soon after dawn—Maraquita, her father and brother, the *moza*, Dolores and the old sergeant major-domo. Codd had cleared his personal quarters for the girl's occupancy during the voyage. Don Luis and his son were to be cabined near by. Then, after Havana... but Codd could not think. He turned on his side, pillowed his face in the hollow of his sound arm.

Like his fellow aboard the Cormorant, the watch on the pirate's bows was lulled to a placid sense of security; the night was so utterly peaceful and quiet.

Suddenly, above the bows of the Bonanza, from martingale and over the bowsprit, swarmed ghostly, dripping forms, silent and cat-like in their movements. Two naked men flung themselves upon the startled anchor watch. A third cast over his head a wringing wet enveloping cloth, stifling outcry. In an instant the sailor was thrown to the deck, bound, gagged.

More men clambered up the anchor cable. In the scuppers, shadowed by the low rail, they slowly wriggled aft, inch by inch. Quietly, and one after another, the few members of the prize crew on deck were surprised and overwhelmed. Then, guardedly, and under shelter of the hull on the side away from the Cormorant, a lantern was displayed for a brief instant, flashed thrice in a signal to the shore.

Soon out of the murk, with noiseless dip of oar there emerged two boats which headed for the Bonanza, keeping the pirate obscuringly in line between them and the warship. Without a sound the boats came alongside and made fast to the corsair. They were packed with dark, armed forms which mounted to the deck and fell into rough line. A tall old man emanating authority told them off into parties, giving each group specific whispered instructions. Standing quietly watching at one side was a man about whose right hand gleamed a white bandage. With him were two women, closely enveloped in long, dark mantles.

Don Luis led his men to the hatches. Young Luis commanded the party which was to invade the forecastle where the off-duty watch slumbered.

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The old don and his sergeant, with their party, would account for the guard over the pirate crew.

It was soon over, the capture effected without a hitch and with no hint of warning to the Cormorant.

THE prize crew, with sleep hanging heavy on their eyelids, were overwhelmed and bound, warned under penalty of instant death to refrain from any outcry. The three Jack Tars on guard over the pirate prisoners were outnumbered. One of them, in a valiant attempt to give the alarm, was cut down in his tracks by the old sergeant. The others with justifiable discretion surrendered to superior force. They were dazed by the suddenness of the attack.

Don Luis had Hugo brought before him, and, himself, cut his bonds. He led the pirate chief aside.

"Don Hugo," he began. Don Luis's eyes glittered with intense purpose. The cumulative wrath of the day's happenings burned fiercely and implacably within him. "I have been compelled to take matters into my own hands. Out of nowhere a bolt has leaped. Ten thousand curses upon those who are responsible!"

Hurriedly he sketched out the salient points of the situation, told of the unheard-of, preposterous demands made upon him—and of his refusal to accept the conditions offered. His hot anger blazed.

"I lived at peace with all men; I harmed nobody. I loved my country and my kind. This—this viper Codd, whom I nursed in the bosom of my family, betrayed me. He is a fit representative of his nation—vile, grasping, dishonorable . . .! *Por Santos Dios!* I live now but to be avenged.

"See now, Don Hugo! . . . I offer you freedom; you and your men. With this condition:

"Before God on high I take solemn oath to wage incessant and relentless war against that country which has despoiled me and mine. Already your lives are forfeit. Only by the sword may you hope to live. If you and your men will join me, fight under my leadership, obey my orders implicitly, I promise you ample compensation in goods and vengeance. What say you, Don Hugo? Will you fight with me?"

Hugo's eyes darted fires of satisfaction.

"Done! On the spot! I, too, have many scores to settle!"

"Then we must be quick. Warn your men to absolute silence. Release them and get them on deck."

"At once."

Black Hugh's beady eyes narrowed as they fell upon the two man-o'-war's men of the watch, who stood in the hands of Don Luis's people. A triumphant snarl lifted the corners of the pirate's thin lips. He plucked a cutlass from the scabbard at the side of one of the prisoners.

"We need no excess human cargo, Don Luis. Life is not so empty of satisfaction, after all."

"What do you mean? What do you intend?"

"Pig-sticking, *señor*. Let us see how well they can squeal!"

In a stride Don Luis crossed to Hugo. He laid the blade of his drawn rapier commandingly across the steel of the cutlass, holding the cutlass down and harmless.

"Wage war, is what I said. Let this be clearly understood. There will be no murder of unarmed men. Make no mistake. You will caution your men to observe this order. It is my command.

"Before you are through with this

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venture there will be blood aplenty. But we will fight as gentlemen; not as cutthroats. If this be understood, release your men and send them above."

AS the waning moon rose higher above the mistful horizon, the anchor watch aboard the Cormorant thought of a *señorita* in Havana, and was greatly pleased by his thoughts.

Casually he glanced toward the Bonanza—blinked—rubbed his eyes. Bonanza seemed farther away than she should have been, the hull a dark blob on the water and the raking masts scarcely to be imagined in the gloom. And as the man stared there came faintly through the night the whine and squeak of sheaves, blocks, rove through by throat and peak halyards. A dim whitish expanse began mounting above the blur of the hull. Bonanza was making sail.

Through subconscious ears Codd, too, heard the faint noise of the tackle-blocks. The sixth sense of a responsible commander gave sharp warning of something amiss. Abruptly he raised himself to an elbow, the wounded shoulder twinging in torment at the sudden move; and his searching eyes followed the evidence of his ears toward the captive ship under his charge.

Bonanza's sails bellied; filled. Under a helm hard over the pirate schooner swung about, gathered headway, heeled to the night breeze and stood out toward the mouth of the inlet.

Zebulon Codd bounded to his feet and his voice roared out alarm:

"General quarters! . . ."

A babel of shouts relayed the command. Mullins's pipe shrilled raucously above the sudden uproar.

The halyards were manned in a twinkling. Intimate hands cast off the furling lines. With a "Heavo-ho!" the sails rattled to their full spread, set, belayed, sheeted home. A seaman with an anchor-bar battered at the cable-shackle, knocked out the bolt. The freed anchor-chain splashed. Cormorant was unleashed.

"Clear for action! Cast loose and provide! . . ."

The rolling drum beat to quarters. The crew threw off the gun-lashings.

Codd himself took the helm. His crisp orders stilled the confusion. As the Cormorant gathered way he pointed her in pursuit straight for the fleeting corsair which, with a head start, was rapidly slipping away into the murk.

"Mullins!"

The boatswain ran up, reported to his captain.

"Take the bow gun, Mullins. Stop her. Sink her if necessary!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

As the old boatswain squinted over his dim sights, his hands automatically adjusting the elevating quoin to proper breech-depression, the gun crew watched with high approval.

"Old Bull's-eye Tubby!" one murmured in admiration: "He's a cat. The old devil can see in the dark!"

Abruptly and in a sheet of flame the bow gun roared through the startled night. Straining their eyes, all hands watched for the fall of the shot. They could barely make out the faint ghostliness of the target. A dimly-seen gray plume leaped up out of the dark expanse of water separating the vessels.

"Short . . .!"

OUT of the gloom rang a voice in hail:

"Cormorant ahoy!"

A dark mass in the water directly in the path of the schooner, as she slowly

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gained increasing headway, materialized into the form of a long boat. Codd spun the wheel, made a pilot's luff.

For an instant the vessel nosed into the wind, veered sufficiently from her course to avoid running down the boat. As she swept past, hands seized the passing rail of the schooner where an alert party manned the side, prepared with pike and cutlass to repel boarders.

Voices cursed them in English with nasal twang. The men scrambled aboard. Don Luis had set them adrift. He had lived up to his word: to fight as gentlemen fight.

The prize-master in charge of them reported to Codd as the pursuit was resumed. He told what had occurred, how the ship had been surprised and captured. Hugo, the pirate chief, in some manner had turned the tables on them. The petty officer had not seen Don Luis, for the Spaniard had been in the hold with the pirates, and afterward, only on the quarter-deck, with Maraquita and his son. So he knew nothing of the true inwardness of the capture.

Others of the prize crew made their way forward where Mullins crouched over the gun, laying it for another shot. These men, lately adrift, were garrulous with excitement. Two of them had been on watch over the corsair prisoners when Don Luis had directed their capture. One of their number was dead; cut down in his tracks. And when they were hurried to the deck they had seen Maraquita.

Mullins was about to fire when his ears caught this disclosure.

"What's that?"

The man told him. There was a woman aboard the Bonanza: two women. One of them was the captain's sweetheart. Certainly he knew her. There could be no mistake.

Mullins floundered in dismay. He turned from his gun to look astern where his captain stood. He swung hopefully about to stare after the fleeing Bonanza. He could barely make her out. She was walking away from them, and there was no apparent chance of overhauling her.

"What's the matter with that bow gun? Look alive for'd! Wake up, Mullins, wake up!" Codd's voice boomed across the deck.

Mullins was awake: intensely so. The situation was appalling. Codd's sweetheart aboard the Bonanza; Codd firing on her!

As Codd ran forward, having turned the helm over to his sailing-master, Mullins hastily bent over the breech of the long thirty-two. He twiddled with the elevating quoin, signalled for a heave on the traversing-bar.

"What the hell's delaying you, Mullins?" Codd exploded. "Fire, men, fire! Don't let her escape!"

"Aye, aye, sir . . ."

THE brisk timbre of the boatswain's reply was reassuring. It implied intense concentration upon the matter at hand. Undoubtedly, this time, the speeding Bonanza would be blown from the water. Mullins sprang aside, gave the word: the waiting quarter-gunner jerked the lanyard and the flint-lock hammer fell. A flash—a deafening roar.

Through the murk Codd watched with straining eyes for the fall of the shot. A column of white water dashed high—at least a hundred yards abeam of the corsair. Mullins, indeed, had aimed well. The shot fell just where he had intended it to fall. Bearing out the rôle he had assumed, the grizzled old sea scalawag broke into a blue streak of profanity.

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Wrathfully Codd pushed Mullins aside. When again the long thirty-two was loaded and returned to battery, the captain of the Cormorant himself aimed the piece. For a moment Mullins hesitated. Then he gripped the traversing bar, by which the gun carriage could be swung laterally in either direction.

And as Codd gave the command to fire, Mullins savagely, yet minutely, jerked the bar in his hand. Codd saw him do it. As the shot resultantly sped wide of the mark he turned menacingly upon the boatswain. His eyes blazed. In a stride he crossed to Mullins.

"Well, Mullins. What's the answer? I saw you."

For an instant the old fellow made no reply, but looked his captain full in the eyes. Then he quietly answered:

"Yes, sir. I did it, captain. Miss . . . Miss Maraquita is aboard the Bonanza. Her old man captured the ship."

Into the mouth of the inlet, out of the wide gulf, crept a growing haze, a gray, nebulous blanket of fog. Even as Zebulon Codd turned speechlessly to stare after the fleeting prize, the mist bank rolled more heavily in. Before their eyes the Bonanza disappeared, swallowed up, obliterated from view.

All hands waited uneasily for the next order. Codd seemed far away.

Then, with no outward sign of the emotion seething within him, he made his way aft until he stood beside his sailing-master at the wheel.

"Mr. Alwyn," he briefly said, "lay your course for Charleston. Our chase is over."

CHARLESTON, on a Sunday morning bright as liquid gold. On the spar deck of the flagship the Nantucket's crew were mustered aft for divine services. Overhead drooped the church flag. Heads were bowed. With hands upraised, eyes closed in earnest reverence, the fleet chaplain invoked the blessing of the Great Pilot. A pious pause: the services were over. The divisions would be dismissed. The crew stirred with relief.

But there came no leave to break ranks.

Solemnly and sternly an officer in full dress uniform stepped out from the group of glittering officialdom on the quarter-deck. Isolated, he came to a halt, cleared his throat. He nodded to the master-at-arms.

The stocky petty officer leaned over a hooded hatch and beckoned. A file of marines, stiff and impassive under arms, climbed up the ladder and formed on deck. A naval lieutenant in full uniform, wearing his sword of office, emerged with them. Calmly he took his place in their midst.

The sergeant in charge of the detachment gave a low command. Marines and naval officer moved out and halted, facing the colors astern. With no prompting, the officer with the Marines stepped forward a pace and stood at attention facing the other officer who had left his fellows for some purpose.

Lieutenant Zebulon Codd was being paraded for sentence. The finding of a naval court-martial was about to be promulgated.

A cable's length away the Cormorant lay at anchor. Her crew had collected in silent knots about the deck. Tense and awed, their eyes hot and resentful, they scanned the throng on the flagship's deck, searching for sight of their commander. Mullins stood alone by the Cormorant's rail, his features drawn and grim. No man presumed to approach or speak to him.

The officer of the admiral's staff

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read aloud from a stern official document:

> . . . Lieutenant Zebulon Codd is therefore to be cashiered from the naval service, and will be imprisoned for five years at Fort Moultrie, Charleston Harbor.

Zebulon Codd stood, immovable, his face without expression as he gazed calmly back at the officer before him. But the staff officer continued:

> First Endorsement
> Navy Department,
> Washington.
>
> By direction of His Excellency Andrew Jackson, President of the United States of America:
>
> Due to Lieutenant Codd's previous fine record as an officer, so much of the sentence as specifies prison confinement is herewith remitted. The sentence, as so reduced, will be immediately executed. From this date Lieutenant Codd ceases to be an officer in the United States Navy.
>
> LEVI WOODBURY,
> Secretary of the Navy.

THE officer paused. With uneasy abstraction he carefully refolded the order. Still Zebulon Codd made no move, exhibited no change of expression. As though impelled by an inward force, the staff officer walked to the admiral. He seemed to make some low-voiced protest.

The admiral was noted as a fine sailor, and a fighter—but a martinet. In refusal he shook his grizzled head:

"You will do your duty, sir," he directed. The staff officer returned to his position before Codd.

He opened a clasp knife. With the blade he cut away the loop which held in place Zebulon's single gold bullion epaulette. From the breast of the uniform coat he cut away brass buttons. Then he held out his hand.

Wordlessly, Codd unfastened the buckle of his belt and handed it, with its pendent weapon, to the officer. The officer drew the sword, tossed scabbard and belt aside. Over his knee he broke the blade—only by a great effort of strength—and threw the pieces aside with the scabbard.

The muffled drums rolled, sodden in the heavy silence—a silence broken only by the raucous scream of gulls wheeling about the ship. The Marines closed in about Zebulon Codd.

At the side-ladder lay a cutter, manned. In his stripped uniform—which now might have been any nondescript garment of blue—Codd descended the ladder and took his place in the boat. He sat forward.

The coxswain spoke: the cutter headed for the beach.

In the taut harshness of the moment a young giant of an apprentice aboard the schooner—probably a farmer boy with clods still clinging to his discarded brogans—laughed in his uneasy, uncomprehending reaction. In his nervousness he tried to crack a ponderous, bucolic joke.

Mullins turned to him, his eyes red with weeping and fury. He savagely struck with all his might and the young giant fell in a grotesque heap and lay still. Mullins challenged the world:

"See me, now, with the tears on my face! Is there anybody else? . . . Step out, step out!"

But no man came forward. They watched the cutter until it was lost to view, merged into the haze of distant shipping about the wharves. Mullins lost sight of it long before that.

And to Zebulon, sitting there in the prow, thoughts came bitter and fast—thoughts of the future and the revenge it would bring.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

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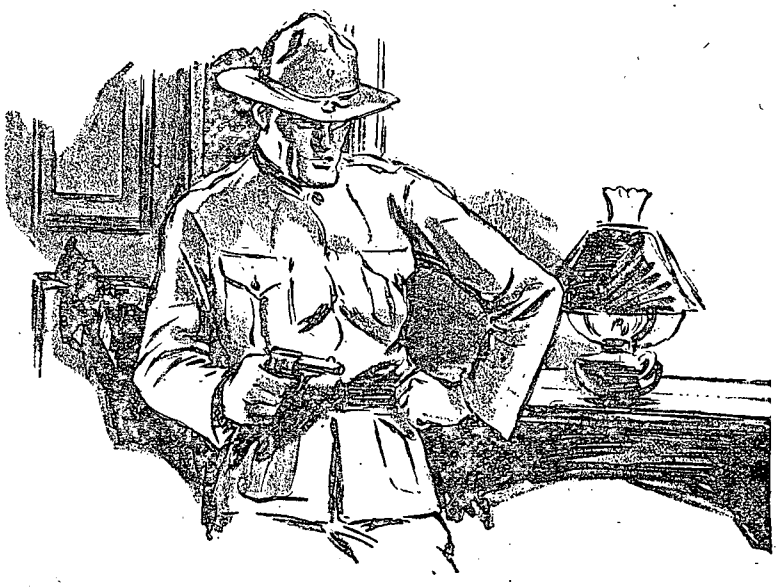

M. P.

Corporal Peters, of the thankless race of M. P.'s, normally had his hands full protecting his fellow-soldiers from the thugs of Panama City's forbidden native quarter—but the trap into which he stumbled this night was no normal one

By LIEUT. JOHN HOPPER

Author of "Swords in Earnest," "A Gr-r-rand an' Glorious Fourth," etc.

Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

PANAMA'S BLACK MENACE.

IN the maelstrom of grunting, cursing, panting men, of flying fists and swaying bodies, a knife glittered. It was arcing forward to sheathe itself in a broad, white back when a mahogany club descended upon the wrist propelling it. The knife dropped from the dirty, brown fist, which a smashed wrist could no longer control, and was lost under the shuffling feet.

"Clear away, you damned cutthroats!" ordered Corporal Richard Peters of the Military Police. His club rose again. After its descent a huge black man fell away, raving with a broken jaw.

The swarthy mongrels and Negroes, who had been on the point of engulfing the little mound of white in their center, rapidly became aware of the solid club laying inexorably among them.

"M. P.!" yelled one, glimpsing the white letters on the blue band around Peter's sleeve.

That cry was the signal for retreat. Like vultures driven from a cadaver, the human vultures of Cocoa Grove fled from their victims to disappear in narrow black alleys.

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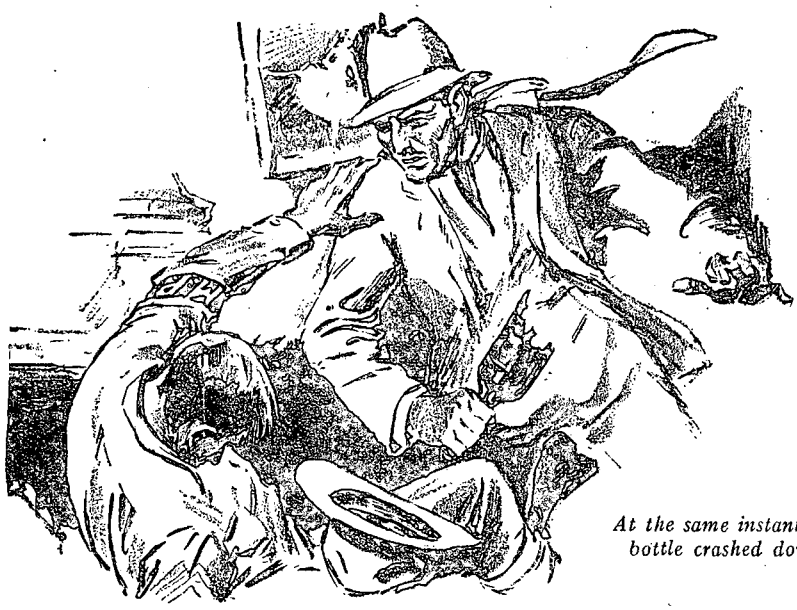

At the same instant the bottle crashed down

Corporal Peters sheathed his club in his wide, web belt and eyed the two sailors in tropical whites. One had the build and general appearance of a white-painted scrap barrel in a butcher shop. His uniform, dirt-streaked and blood-spattered, fitted him like tights fit a chorus girl. His black silk neckerchief, which had twisted about on his massive shoulders during the fight, had its knot under one ear and marked where his neck would have been, if he had any. His face was as round and as fat as a pumpkin and, from his exertions, as red as a setting sun. Two eyes like China-blue marbles beamed at Corporal Peters.

"Thanks, soldier," said this gob. "We soldier and sailor police have a devil of a time, don't we?"

Peters's glance, for the first time, fell to the blue band that clung to the sailor's s l e e v e by a single thread. Crumpled as the band was, he saw enough to know that the gold letters it bore were S. P.—Shore Patrol.

Peters looked interestedly at the S. P.'s prisoner, who was a slim, dark-haired boy clad in a uniform that was filthy with dirt. He appeared to be stupefied, and sat in the street with his frowzy head hanging down. He was held from toppling over only by the S. P.'s fist clutching the collar of his blouse.

"Drunk?" Peters asked the China-blue eyes.

"Nope," replied the S. P. soberly. "Don't think so. Dope."

Peters whistled softly

"We're having a lot of trouble with the stuff, too," he said. "I'd sure like to get onto who're selling it. They ought to be shot. They'll have every dumb kid in the regiment hopheads."

The S. P. shook his prisoner tentatively.

"Yep. It's a rotten game. Take this kid. As nice a youngster as you'd want to buddy with, before the ship hit the tropics. Now look at him! The sight of him would kill a stepmother.

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He's been missing from the ship for a week. I stumbled across him in one of the spig joints. Pretty well hopped up. Fought me like a wild cat at first. But I got him as far as here when his spig friends jumped me from behind. I'd 'a' been a goner, M. P., if you hadn't have happened along. I saw that knife, and I was wondering how it was going to feel when you sailed in and spoiled their party."

"Forget it, sailor. Maybe you can do as much for me some time."

"Hope so," said the fat one earnestly. "My name is Harris, Johnny Harris. . . . Well, I gotta be taking this snowbird up to the wagon. I'll be seeing you, soldier. I'm on watch in this stink hole every night from now until the ship pulls out."

CORPORAL PETERS stood on the curb and watched the S. P. drag his flaccid prisoner up the narrow street to the avenue. In the fight one of the S. P.'s canvas leggings had been torn almost from his leg. Now, as he walked, it flapped the sidewalk like a broken wing.

Peters grinned a little and shrugged his husky shoulders. That was police duty in the Army and Navy. Hated by the soldiers and sailors themselves, and hated by those civilians who purveyed illicit amusements to the Service men.

Being an M. P. was a thankless job, but Corporal Peters found that the duty suited him. In the first place, it demanded those outward appearances in which he took great pride. And his pride was justified. His trim, tailored breeches and shirt of olive-green set well upon his tall, young, rangy figure. The neatness of the spiral putties that wrapped his muscular legs was the envy and despair of hopeful imitators. Gold could not gleam as brightly as the brass of the whistle chain that crossed his broad chest, and the brass of his belt buckle. His campaign hat sat over his lean, bronzed face not belligerently nor rakishly, but purposefully and forcibly. Many a quarrelsome drunk had quieted down noticeably after one look at that hat.

Outward appearances, however, were merely surface manifestations of the corporal's character. Not that he was of the goody-goody, the unvirile, or the fawning type. Far from it. He had probably never attended Sunday school in his life. What he possessed was good, sound, horse sense, which told him that the dubious, shady pleasures of Cocoa Grove, furnished by rat-faced breeds, moronic Negroes, and painted women, often had results that were unfavorable and permanent. He hated the filth of the badly lighted, stenchy holes, the leers of the denizens who, to obtain the American dollar, would lie to, rob, and even knife the thoughtless, good-natured doughboy on a pay-day bender.

Corporal Peters took actual satisfaction that duty placed him in Cocoa Grove where he could be of use to his comrades. He seldom arrested, for arrests meant the guard house and loss of pay to the offender. Instead, he preferred to persuade, to bundle into a taxi, often paying the tariff out of his own small pay, and send back to to the Post after instructing the driver to locate some of the inebriate's buddies to put him to bed quietly. All of which was not quite according to the rules for M. P.'s as handed down by Headquarters, and especially not according to the beliefs and habits of Rufus King, first sergeant of the M. P. Company—but it was O. K. by Corporal Peters's conscience.

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Now as he walked along the street of the district, carmine-lipped women spat obscene phrases at him from doorways strongly perfumed to make them palatable. Panamans and black men clustered in front of noisy *cantinas* sneered—behind his back.

Cocoa Grove of Panama City—a concentrated bit of iniquity that savored of Singapore, Port Said, and Puerto Columbia.

He passed soldiers and sailors, but his duty was concerned only with soldiers. As long as they kept moving and kept out of trouble he paid them no attention. He good-naturedly broke up several groups that were standing about idly. Soldiers were not allowed to loiter in Cocoa Grove.

He reached a street corner which was on the line between the permitted territory for soldiers and the forbidden. He sent his glance curiously over this dark, silent, seemingly deserted, prohibited belt and saw black houses whereon faint cracks of light outlined curtained windows. From dismal doorways fell blurred, yellow oblongs.

From this area the cacophonies of Cocoa Grove were missing. Corporal Peters often thought of the Grove and the forbidden sector as two sisters side by side; one, blond, boisterous and shallow; the other, brunette, silent and mysterious.

AS he stood idly on the street corner regarding the clustered dark houses, he passed in mind's review the important event of the evening so far. He grinned to himself at the short, fat sailor's determined stand against the human rats that had beset him on all sides. He remembered with a thrill of admiration the lusty blows of the S. P. He decided that Johnny Harris appealed to him immensely, and that he would have to get to know him better before the ship sailed.

Then Corporal Peters frowned at the mental picture of the drug-deadened, dark-haired youngster. Dope. What a shame to feed such stuff to kids who were probably on their first tour of the tropics! The youngsters were too green to know what it was all about. Their characters had not yet solidified enough to protect them against the subtle, insidious influences of the tropics.

The corporal's jaw tightened. He'd give a lot to find out who was peddling dope, and where.

He turned to stroll back along his beat, when a figure across the street slipped furtively out of the corner of his eye.

"Hey, soldier!" he called. "You can't go down there! It's off limits." He started across the street. "Come back here!"

The soldier broke into a run, and Corporal Peters followed.

He pounded through back yards, where everything was black except the night sky between the roofs of the houses. Slop and filth splashed up from his feet. He thought ruefully of his uniform, and tightened his lips.

Breathing hard, he finally stopped, and forgot the stench in his nostrils while he listened for footsteps. His ears heard a low, murmurous quiet, but no particular sound that could be attributed to a human being.

Disgruntled at having lost his man, irritated by the certain knowledge that the night chase had decorated his uniform with mud, he was turning to grope his way out of the forbidden territory, when the warm, humid air carried to him a soft, creaking noise. Instantly glancing upward toward the source, he saw a yellow splash, which

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vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

He slipped on a small dead animal and drove his toe through a mushy pile of putrid garbage. But his hands at last found the wall of the house and his feet met the stairs which climbed the face of it.

For all his solid weight and his height of six foot two, Corporal Peters made his way up the stairs as softly as a tiptoeing child. When he reached the upper landing he groped forward in the pitchy darkness until his hand met the door latch. He lifted it and pushed open the door.

HE found himself in a square room poorly illuminated by a kerosene lamp, and containing only a table, some chairs, and a couch against the far wall. There were also, one hanging on each wall, the inevitable garishly-colored pictures of holy and patriotic subjects so dear to the Latin-American heart.

Corporal Peters had expected such furnishings. And he was not even surprised by the three men around the table, who were drinking, and gambling with dominoes.

They were swarthy, slovenly dressed natives. Like cats watching a dog, they eyed the corporal.

"Where's the soldier?" demanded Peters.

In unison the three natives eloquently raised their shoulders, and one said, "No soldier here, M. P."

"Yeah?" said Corporal Peters, eying a curtained doorway beyond the table. "We'll just have a look, anyway."

The three heads came together above the table, and a murmur of Spanish rose from them. When Peters approached the curtained doorway, one native stood up from the table and barred his path.

"You can't go in there, M. P. No soldier there, anyhow."

It took more than glittering black eyes, and a scraggly black mustache, every hair of which was singly visible against the brown skin over the thin lips, to worry Corporal Peters.

"Get out of my way! I saw a soldier come in here—and I'm going to take him out."

"Oh, yeah?"

The curtain suddenly parted to reveal a soldier whose narrow green eyes were nearly level with Peters's gaze. The man's jaw was his most salient feature, being heavy and broad like the keel of a tugboat.

"Listen, M. P! Take a walk. It ain't healthy for you guys around here. Get me?"

The jaw moved slowly forward until it was offensively close to Peters's face. The green eyes glittered unnaturally.

"Yes, I get you!" replied the corporal grimly. His arm shot out to fasten his hand to the other's shoulder. "I got you! Now come on!"

There was a slight sound behind Peters, a sound like a rat makes scurrying over a pile of wood in the cellar. The M. P. whirled, and his heavy shoe lashed out to double up in agony the native who had sneaked behind him with an upraised bottle.

However, during this maneuver Peters was unable to maintain his hold upon his prisoner. And when he turned to take him again he found himself looking into the little, round, black mouth of a revolver.

"That 'll be about all from you, M. P.!" gritted the soldier with the tugboat jaw. "Back up!"

Peters backed reluctantly, while his

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brain worked swiftly to discover some way to master the situation again.

"Juan, bar the door," ordered the soldier. "Pedro"—he indicated the man who was nursing his stomach and groaning—"now you can use your bottle. Tap him on the conk."

At those words, Corporal Peters lunged forward in the face of the gun. He was not going to go out standing still.

Tugboat Jaw laughed sarcastically and sidestepped.

The bottle crashed down on its mark.

CHAPTER II.

RAIDED.

TO Corporal Peters it seemed that he was traveling a long way in a dark woods, where he could not see. Now, in the distance, he heard voices. One rose above the rest and managed to hold, for a fraction of time, his dull attention.

"Open that door! Open it, I say, or we'll break it down!"

Continuous claps of strange thunder reverberated above the dark woods through which Corporal Peters was passing again. The sound of it grievously hurt his aching head as he strove desperately to bring himself to a realization of where he was and what was happening. Now a jerky, splintering noise climaxed the thunder. It was as if lightning had struck a giant tree, which in consequence was slowly toppling over, groaning in protest.

Corporal Peters opened his eyes. Wearily, dully, they witnessed the fall of the door, smashed from its hinges, and the four men who entered in the Army's olive-green.

The young native girl, who had been sitting silently on the couch beside the outstretched corporal, got up and flitted to the curtained doorway, behind which she vanished.

The four soldiers, three of whom wore on their sleeves the blue band of the Military Police, followed the departure of the slim, dark girl with curious, appraising glances. Now they turned their eyes toward the corporal on the couch.

Rufus King, first sergeant of the Military Police Company, was at their head. He studied the corporal with a face that was long, gray and bony, and which, even in less unpleasant circumstances, always carried a sour look of sarcasm and d i s t r u s t. Or perhaps, since he had been guiding the destinies of the M. P. Company for a number of years, it was caused by seeing so much of the seamy side of life, the lies, the base passions and lusts of men, with which he necessarily came much in contact.

At any rate, despite his looks, Sergeant Rufus King bore an excellent reputation among the p o w e r s that were for being the man for his job. Harshly and efficiently he disciplined the M. P.'s under him, the flatfeet who p o u n d e d the beats. He brooked no shirking of duty, and upon discovering any, punished with bitter zeal untempered by mercy and with very little understanding.

He strode to the couch and stared down contemptuously at the corporal. The smoky kerosene lamp on the table behind his lean and s c r a w n y form cast his black shadow across the prostrate man.

The two M. P. privates who accompanied Sergeant King also stared at the red-eyed, dazed soldier in disordered uniform on the couch. Finding Corporal Peters like this made

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them feel uncomfortable. It was hard to believe. They wanted to get out and get some fresh air. In their hearts they felt sympathy for him. Although they had not been long with the company, they knew Sergeant Rufus King.

The fourth soldier, he whose sleeve carried no blue band, clung to the background. From time to time his big jaw cautiously turned toward the curtained doorway.

"Drunk on duty, eh?" sneered Sergeant King in a thin voice that carried the tone of a twanging banjo string. "Corporal Peters, the model M. P.! I thought something like this would happen some day," he added, a trace of bitter satisfaction creeping into his voice. "You were too good to last!"

The sergeant turned to the wide-eyed, uncomfortable privates.

"Come here!" he snapped. "You two will be witnesses. Look at him," he ordered disgustedly. "Dead drunk—almost paralyzed. Look at the condition of his uniform—filthy. Smell the booze on him." He pointed to the table. "Note the whisky bottle and the glasses." He narrowed his eyes at the two young soldiers. "You saw the woman, too. Native girl. In the forbidden district. That's all."

With troubled glances at the corporal on the couch, the two soldiers stepped back to their original places beside the doorway.

Sergeant King looked down at Corporal Peters once more, and laughed thinly, mirthlessly. Suddenly his black shadow dipped as he darted down to grasp the corporal's torpid body with his lean, leathery, talonlike fingers. The sergeant's muscles might have been made of wire, so easily did he lift the man, heavier than himself, and fling him to the floor crashing among the legs of the chairs and table.

The awed, frightened eyes of the young M. P. privates stared at the blood which now pushed across the corporal's pallid face, welling slowly from some gash in his head.

"Drag him out!" ordered Sergeant King grimly. "In the morning, after the captain sees him, we'll cut that blue band off his arm."

CAPTAIN JACKSON was not a hard man at heart, but he was in a hard job, and he knew it. To every job that befell him in the army he gave the best that was in him. He knew that in policing the morals and habits of soldiers in a tropical country he had to be rigorously stern about the morals and habits of the M. P.'s, his agents. Laxity in them would give rise to a woeful laxity among the rank and file.

Accordingly, in his office the next morning, after hearing the testimony of the various witnesses and the conflicting statement of the pale and earnest Corporal Peters, he summoned the corporal before him.

"Peters," he began, "I am very much surprised and not a little sorry about that affair which happened last night. I would have expected it from any one else in the company but you. I am more surprised, however, that you would make a statement under oath, in order to escape the natural consequences of your act, that is so absurd and unlikely on the face of it as to be palpably false.

"But I understand," he said more kindly. "It goes hard to see a splendid record spoiled by one foolish slip. Because of that record, Peters, and because I believe you have learned your lesson, I am not going to prefer charges against you. Of course, in view of what has happened, you can-

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not very well remain a member of the outfit.

"I am reducing you to the grade of private, and I shall arrange to have you transferred back to your regiment. It will be a matter of a few days, and in the meantime Sergeant King will give you something to do around the barracks. Turn in your arm bands, your pistol, and your whistle this morning, Peters."

The captain bent to his papers and reports on the desk, indicating that the interview was terminated and the case closed.

"But, captain—" began Peters, relaxing from rigid attention to extend an appealing hand.

The captain kept his head down doggedly to his papers. He, too, felt badly. He had liked Peters, and had admired him for a clean and intelligent soldier. But evidence was evidence. Captain Jackson had sat on too many military courts not to take the word of a first sergeant in preference to the contradictory word of the accused.

Corporal Peters stumbled blindly to the door. His world had been a fine, glittering, pleasant glass ball, and now it was shattered in pieces.

IMMERSED in his hopeless, bitter thoughts, he was taking his way across the stretch of green grass that separated the Headquarters building from the company barracks, when he came face to face with the soldier whose testimony, earlier in the morning, had caused Peters to writhe in despair and impotent rage. The man with the tugboat jaw was a soldier out of the regiment, Private Hickman.

Action followed impulse. The former M. P.'s fist crashed against the jutting jaw and drove Hickman reeling back along the path. Hickman cursed savagely, and his right hand clawed at his hip pocket. Peters was upon him furiously before he could drag what he wanted from the pocket. The ex-corporal's right hand found the throat under the overhanging jaw, his left grasped the wrist at the hip pocket.

"Let go!" gritted Peters. "Let go, or I'll choke you!"

Gasping, and clawing at the sinewy fingers around his windpipe, Hickman obeyed.

"Now," said Peters grimly, "you're going in to the captain with me and tell the truth about last night. You're going to deny those lies you told about seeing me stagger drunkenly into the forbidden area, about your following me because you were afraid I would come to harm in my condition, about your going back to get Sergeant King to come and get me out of that house. You yellow liar! Come on!"

As Peters would have dragged his struggling captive away, a hand grasped his shoulder and an irresistible strength whirled him around.

He looked into the malignant features of Sergeant King.

"Drop him!" ordered the sergeant tersely. "Criminal assault now, is it? It would go hard with you, Peters, if you were to be brought before a court-martial for what happened last night, and for attacking a witness who happened to testify against you."

Reluctantly Peters released Hickman, who stepped away from him, caressing his throat and snarling curses.

For a long moment the ex-M. P. and the sergeant looked at each other, eye to eye. It was then that Peters came to the bitter realization that he would only make himself appear in worse light by endeavoring to drag the truth

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from Hickman by force. Testimony obtained by such method, coercing a witness by force and fear of death, would not be acceptable to Captain Jackson, to a military court, to any one.

"Report to the supply sergeant," said Rufus King at last. "He'll give you a lawn mower and a pair of shears. From now until you are transferred, you can spend your time trimming the grass around barracks."

FOR two long days, Richard Peters, ex-corporal, Military Police, blistered in the tropical sun cutting grass, raking paths, and trimming flower beds and hedges around the low M. P. barracks which clung to the precipitous slope of Ancon Hill. He had plenty of time to think.

He knew that he had been framed. After the native had hit him on the head with the bottle, Hickman had stretched him out on the couch, had saturated his uniform with whisky, and had set the stage with the native girl and the liquor on the table. Then, after getting rid of the three Panamans, Hickman had gone to Sergeant King with his lying story.

It was an old game, but it had worked most effectively. However, if King had been a different type of first sergeant, if he had been like some of the kind, trustful and understanding old top-kicks Peters had known during his army career, the outcome might have been different, and the nervy Hickman would be sitting now in the guard house.

No use to rail against fate, however, Peters came to realize in his calmer moments. Sergeant Rufus King possessed a nature that was inherently suspicious, mean, and willing to believe the worst against any man. In fact, it had been demonstrated in previous cases, that when any of the men under him in his own company got into trouble, the sergeant never defended him, but always preferred to believe the other side. In this respect he was like those mothers, rare fortunately, who always believe their offspring to be forever in the wrong.

Therefore, Peters understood the reasons for Sergeant King's behavior. But he did wonder why Hickman had gone to such labor to frame him. Any other soldier, caught in such a predicament after the native wielded the bottle, would have cut and run for it.

For hours at a time Peters puzzled over Hickman. And all his thoughts came bouncing back from blank walls.

Most soldiers are fatalists. The Army seems to breed fatalism. It may be attributed to the certainty of reveille, taps, inspections, and unpleasant duties.

Peters had a share of this fatalism. Therefore, except for a soreness of spirit, which he knew that time would dissipate, he commenced to become resigned to returning to his regiment for normal company duty. Circumstances had conspired against him successfully. No matter how much he thought, he saw no way of gaining a reversal of decision. Things, even though they were not right, happen that way sometimes, and a man was powerless against them.

He did, however, experience a deep tugging at his heartstrings when he thought of no longer walking clad in that invisible aura of authority vouchsafed by the magic letters M. P. on his sleeve. He sighed reluctantly. Well, somebody else would have to give the drunks and foolish ones a helping hand now.

The thought of any shame or dis-

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grace attaching to him due to the circumstances of his dismissal from the M. P. Company never occurred to Peters. His inner sense of right and wrong was too strong and manly for that. He did feel sorry, nevertheless, that his company commander, Captain Jackson, should have believed him capable of perjuring his word to escape punishment, no matter how severe. And from time to time powerful gusts of rage swept over him when he thought of how he had been outwitted and tricked by Hickman.

IT was while he was spading sod around the flower beds in front of barracks that a voice, familiar-sounding and yet not recognizable, hailed him.

"Ahoy, there! What's happened to you? I haven't seen you down in the Grove for the last two nights."

Peters turned to face Johnny Harris, the S. P., red-faced, and puffing like a fish on land from the exertion of hauling his bulky body up the hill.

They sat down, and Peters told the sailor what had happened.

"Jehosaphat!" exclaimed Harris. "What a guy this Hickman must be! And if we had a bird like King in the Navy he'd find himself swimming ashore some dark night from the middle Atlantic. I thought something must be up when you didn't show around the Grove these last two nights. So I thought I'd come over here this afternoon and see what happened to you . . . Gee!" concluded the sailor earnestly, "I wish I could do something to help you!"

Peters laughed shortly.

"So do I, Harris. But I guess nobody can. Sometimes things just happen that way." To change the unpleasant subject, he asked, "How did you make out with the doped kid the other night?"

"Oke. I turned him over to the patrol without any more trouble. He's in the brig now awaiting trial. Poor devil! By the way, Peters, it was brought out in the investigation the next morning that he got the stuff from one of your fellows, a soldier. A queer-looking duck, the kid said, with a big jaw."

"A big jaw!" repeated Peters.

"Yeah. A big jaw. That's all the kid said he remembered about him—Where're you going?" the S. P. broke off to demand as Peters rose hurriedly. "What's the matter? What makes you look like that?"

"Nothing — nothing," replied Peters, with an expression which plainly said that his thoughts were no longer with Harris. "I've got to go into barracks. I got to do something. I'll be seeing you—later—Harris."

Harris stared perplexedly after the tall, well-knit form of Peters. Then the S. P. sadly contemplated the steep slope he had to descend.

CHAPTER III.

BARON OF DOPE.

THAT night Cocoa Grove again saw Dick Peters, ex-corporal, Military Police. It saw him, but did not recognize him. No one took the sloppy, drunken sot of a soldier who staggered from *cantina* to *cantina,* who replied tipsily and fatuously to the hails of the carmined girls, for the neat and dignified corporal of Military Police the Grove had known. Even the M. P.'s on their beats, who eyed him narrowly, did not recognize him with the dirt from his jag streaking his face, with his hair hanging down slovenly

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beneath the campaign hat jammed low over his eyes.

In all the Grove, there was only one who finally did recognize him. He was Harris, the S. P. Harris was flat-footing along the street, perspiring copiously in his uniform of white duck, and swinging his club idly when he saw ahead of him a soldier lurch into a *cantina* which catered to the most furtive element of Cocoa Grove.

Harris looked again, and his chubby knuckles dug into his China-blue eyes.

"Jehosaphat!" breathed the sailor, and hurried to the *cantina*. He found Peters swaying at the wet, untidy bar.

"Say, boy!" began the sailor uneasily, and taking Peters's arm. "What the devil are you doing this for? You'd better come along with me and let me put you into a taxi for home."

Peters wrenched his arm free and gave Harris a glassy, belligerent look.

"Leave m'lone! Get outa here! Nobody asked you to butt it." He bared his teeth and raised a menacing fist. "*Get away from me, I say!* I don't want t'have anythin' t'do with you an' your kind. S. P.'s an' M. P.'s!" Peters laughed bitterly. "A buncha liars, framers, yella bellies, an' snitchers. I'll smash the next blamed one that says a word to me. I'm through with 'em! You hear? I'm through with 'em! An' that means you too, you pot-bellied lobster!"

"But, Peters—" objected Harris in awe.

"Get out!" roared Peters, pointing to the doorway. "Before I throw you out!"

There was nothing else for Harris to do. He was no match for the madman towering above him.

The sailor retreated reluctantly to the door, where he hesitated for a moment watching Peters with troubled eyes. Then he turned and went out into the street

Peters leaned on the bar where a baboon-faced Negro was waiting to serve him.

"That's the way to treat them fellows, soldier," said the black man admiringly.

"Rum!" ordered the soldier, not deigning to reply.

With a single gulp, Peters tossed off the poisonous liquid, which had been diluted with water and cigar butts swept off the filthy floor, according to the established custom of Cocoa Grove *cantinas*.

"Say," he leered at the bartender, "don't it ever snow down here? I'm crazy for some snow. This stuff"—he contemptuously indicated his empty glass—"don't do me any good."

Baboon Face narrowed his lids.

"Snow?" he repeated.

"Yeah, snow!" snarled Peters emphatically. "You know what I mean."

With a boasting gesture, the soldier drew a fat roll of bills from his pocket and flung them on the bar.

"I ain't sayin' what I'd give to see some real snow. But there's plenty there."

Cupidity crept into the baboon face of the Negro as he eyed the money on the bar. He moistened his liver lips and said, "Wait a minute, soldier."

When he reappeared through the door behind the bar, he had with him a tubercular-looking, weasel-faced Panaman, from whose thin lips a brown, native cigarette dangled.

"You go with him, soldier. Maybe he can find some snow for you."

As Peters was turning away with the narrow-shouldered youth, the Negro caught his arm.

"What about me, mister? Ain't you—"

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Peters flung him a five-dollar bill, which he snatched, bobbing repeatedly and showing his double row of glistening white teeth in a wide, knowing grin.

AS Peters had hoped, and had partly expected, his silent guide, with many a furtive look behind, led him to the boundary that separated the Grove from the forbidden sector. While they hesitated on a poorly-lighted street corner, with the youth peering about for possible M. P.'s. Peters felt uneasy thrills capturing the blood streams of his body. It was as if he were standing at the edge of a cliff staring down into a rocky gorge hundreds of feet below. One step more would mean death.

One step more and he would be in the forbidden district, where the darkness, the squalor, and the stench, hid secrets only the denizens knew. One step more might mean his death. His quest for " snow " might end in a knife across his jugular, with dusky fingers probing for the roll of bills in his pocket.

His guide was signalling that the way was clear, and that they should proceed. Peters cursed him impatiently, and lurched forward.

They stole through the darkness between houses until they reached a place which caused Peters's heart to drop in instant, bitter disappointment. It was not the house he remembered.

They passed through the entranceway and down a narrow, shadowed, musty hall until they reached a door at the back of the house. The guide rapped softly on the panel of this door, and by the regular intervals between the raps, Peters knew that a signal was being given.

After a short wait, the door swung back to reveal a tall, bulky figure that almost shut out the light from within the room. The guardian of the door and the guide surveyed each other for an instant and eye language passed between them. Then the guardian stepped aside.

As Peters entered the room, his heart began to pound unnaturally. He recognized the table and the chairs, the couch against the far wall, and even the pictures of elemental, clashing colors. He knew instantly what had happened. Obvious. The dope sellers had moved.

The guardian of the door and Peters's guide, without a word to him, passed into a room beyond, closing the separating door behind them.

Worry charged furiously into Peters's brain while he waited in that silent, lamplit, shoddy room. Had he been recognized? Did they suspect him? He did not recognize either of these two for any of the three he had seen sitting around the table in the other house. But then, there was the possibility that these two had been with Hickman behind the curtained doorway, and had appeared only when the M. P. had been sunk in unconsciousness by the blow of the bottle. He stared at the closed, enigmatical door as if he could penetrate it by the very intensity of his look. What was going on behind it?

NOW there was some one at that door. Subconsciously, Peters tensed his muscles. Who would appear? Hickman? Any one of the original three natives?

But the man who entered the room was only the guardian. He bore in his hands a small package wrapped neatly in white paper. Peters knew that so far he had not been identified.

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This man before him was huge. His skin was coffee-colored, but his features were Negroid. His ears were small, pointed, and animal-like. They looked grotesque clinging to his big, bullet-shaped head, which was topped by a tight mass of black curls.

"Fifty dollars—gold," said the man, eying the soldier closely.

Confidence grew in Peters. He was here. He already had learned much. He wanted to learn more. As yet he had discovered no evidence connecting Hickman with the game. So Peters ignored the persistent danger signal from some recessed part of his brain, and decided to temporize for the moment.

"Too high!" he protested with a snarl. "Whacha think I am? A general?"

The giant breed pushed a menacing face with narrowed eyes and curling lips close to Peters's nose.

"You no have fifty dollars, soldier?"

"Fifty dollars!" snorted Peters contemptuously. He jerked out his roll of bills.

Black eyes widened and gleamed at the sight.

"All right, soldier," said the native softly. "Give me twenty-five then."

Now the signal in Peters's brain was flagging frantically. But futilely.

"O. K.," he said, peeling off a twenty and a five. "Now you got a place where a fellow can rest and enjoy himself?"

"Sure, soldier," said thick lips with a suave smile.

THERE was only a door, but no windows, in the tiny, boxlike room in which Peters found himself. It contained a filthy cot, a chair, and a chest of drawers, stained and cracked, and bearing a smoky lamp on its top. He sat down on the bed and listened to the footsteps receding into silence.

He eyed the white package in his hand. So far, so good. He had a sample of dope. He had paid for it with marked bills. Now all he lacked was a definite tie binding Hickman. Finding that, he would leave the house, make his way back to Cocoa Grove, and telephone Captain Jackson.

In a few minutes, Peters decided, he would make a stealthy inspection of the house. If discovery happened upon him during his prowling, he would have the excuse that he was looking for a drink, a cigarette.

That he was in an extremely dangerous and unstable situation, he realized. If he were to be recognized as the M. P. who had stumbled on the late quarters of the dope den the other night, his life would be worth less than an ink-soaked blotter.

The minutes dragged on. So silent was the house that Peters was almost ready to believe that he was its sole occupant.

He rose carefully from the cot in order that the creaking of its rusty springs might be as little as possible, and made his way to the door. After a listening pause, he was about to extend his hand to open it when he detected the sound of feet cautiously approaching from the other side.

Thinking swiftly, Peters returned to the cot and lay down. If the stealthily approaching unknown were on an errand to see what the customer was doing, it would be better that he find Peters asleep.

As the door slowly and carefully opened, Peters closed his eyes. By intuition rather than by hearing, Peters knew that the intruder was standing

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over him. He was glad that he had turned his face to the wall. It would have been hard to feign sleep knowing that some one was staring down at him, perhaps some one who would recognize him and, after doing so, attack him lying prone and defenseless.

As time and silence went on interminably, every nerve in Peters's body protested to his will against the passivity of his body which it enforced. Although the elapsed time was hardly more than a single minute, to Peters it seemed an eternity. The silence became more menacing as it was prolonged. Who was the unknown standing beside the cot, and what was his purpose?

The purpose now became apparent as Peters felt a hand sliding gently into his breeches pocket. In that pocket was his money. It was his savings.

Peters's action was more instinctive than reasoned. His own hand shot up swiftly to imprison the fingers in his pocket. He turned to look into the startled face of Hickman, the soldier with the tugboat jaw.

With an explosive curse, which carried in it fear and fury, Hickman wrenched his hand free and staggered back from the cot.

"H e l p!" he yelled. "Carlos! Tomás!"

Then, with murder blazing in his eyes, he drove his hand back to his hip pocket.

PETERS'S spring brought him face to face with Hickman in time to seize the wrist that held the pistol dragged from the hip pocket. He forced the hand with the gun high over Hickman's head and, locked together, the two men struggled for control of the weapon.

"Carlos! Tomás!" screamed Hickman again. "Dang you!" he panted wildly into Peters's grim face. "I'll kill you, you snoopin', yellow M. P.!"

Hickman tried to bury his face against Peters's neck where his huge jaw could affix his teeth to the corded muscles and tear them out. Peters's square, solid shoulder came up to meet the maneuver and Hickman's face snapped back dripping blood from mouth and nose.

Now silently the two men gripped together swayed and struggled. But Peters's clean living and conscientious physical exercises were slowly and inexorably turning the tide of the battle his way.

With his big chest heaving from his exertions, he at last flung Hickman from him, at the same time tearing his pistol from his grasp. Hickman bounced back in blind, mad fury, and Peters sent him staggering again with one powerful blow on the jaw from his left hand.

Peters sprang away from the limp and momentarily dazed Hickman. The house possessed life now, and with excited cries and sounds of pounding feet, it was advancing upon the door of the room.

"Stand back!" ripped Peters at the door. "I'll kill the man who lays a hand to that door."

He leveled the pistol and fired once. The bullet smashed through the door, splintering one of the panels. From beyond there came a sharp scream of pain, a string of oaths in Spanish, and the sounds of feet retreating precipitously.

Peters bounded to the door and shot home the bolt with which it was equipped.

He turned to look into the venomous eyes of Hickman.

"A lot of good that 'll do you!"

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snarled Hickman. "You're trapped, you cursed fool! You'll never get out of this room alive. He'll find a way to get you—if he has to kill me with you. That's the way he is," continued Hickman bitterly. "He'll set fire to the house and burn us in it like a couple of rats. Nobody'll stop him in this hell hole. Nobody gives a damn. He'll starve you in this room, and me with you. He'll—"

"Who's 'he'?" cut in Peters grimly.

Hickman's reply was a sarcastic laugh, more mad than sane, which ended in a choking gurgle. He spat the blood from his mouth and cursed.

"You'll never know who he is, M. P. And nobody else will either. He's too blasted clever for that. The merciless, inhuman devil!"

Hickman's mouth began to roll and quiver like jelly.

"He'll kill me, too!" he slobbered. "He's a fiend, I tell you! He's a devil from Hades, and nobody knows it. Curse you! Curse you! Let me out of here!"

A continuous crash, like the staccato roll of a snare drum only infinitely more loud and awful, burst on their ears. Peters, who was watching Hickman, saw him clutch agonizedly at his breast and then crumple slowly to the floor.

Peters knew. Sub-machine gun.

He dropped flat to the floor and wriggled under the cot. Amid the roaring of the weapon outside, the splintering of the door as the bullets smashed through it tracing their deadly diagrams, the plaster dust spurting from hundreds of holes in the walls of the room, he thrust out the pistol he had captured from Hickman and fired once—twice—three times.

The gesture mocked him. There was no effect. Evidently the gun outside was protected by some barricade or angle. Peters might as well not have had a gun in his hand at all. The noise was so great that the only proof he had that the pistol ever fired was the kick it gave his hand.

IT would be only a matter of seconds before they got him. He could see the pattern of bullet holes on the door and the thin, tropical walls. They finely covered the area of the room from the top of a tall man's head down to his waist. Now the pattern was descending.

From side to side—lower and lower.

Now the bullets were thudding into Hickman's huddled body. They were like invisible fingers plucking at him.

They were spraying across the room, hugging the floor. Another instant and they would be plowing through Peters, ex-M. P. Ex-Peters.

Suddenly the firing stopped. It seemed like Hade's pandemonium hushed by one uplifting of an all-powerful Hand.

With his sleeve Peters wiped from his perspiring face chips of enamel that had been sprayed upon it by a bullet striking the leg of the cot.

He heard voices and footsteps crowding to the door. So they thought that they had got him! he thought grimly. He raised his pistol.

"Peters!" called an anxious voice. "Peters! Are you alive? Open the door! It's me, Johnny Harris!"

The ordeal had been so terrible, the strain on his nerves so great, that Peters was trembling in every limb and perspiration ran copiously from his face and hands. Like a man awake, but still partially under the stupefying influence of a horrible nightmare, he

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dragged himself from beneath the cot and staggered forward to open the door.

Harris, the S. P., grasped him and hugged him against his barrel-like form in vast relief.

"Old man! Old man!" cried the sailor in a voice choked with emotion. "I almost let you go. I thought you really meant it when you bawled me out and told me to get out of that *cantina.* Then I saw you come out with that native rat. Right there I made up my mind I was going to save you whether you liked it or not. I figured I owed it to you for what you did for me. So I rounded up some of the lads and trailed you. We lost track of you in the black belt. And we were about to give up hunting for you when we heard the firing."

Looking over Harris's shoulder, Peters saw that the hall was filled with grim-faced sailors in the Navy's trim white, in black silk neckerchiefs and canvas leggings. All were members of the S. P. With their clubs they dominated a group of sullen, cowering natives. And in the middle of this motley bunch was a white man, a soldier, the sight of whom widened Peters's eyes. The man staring back at him so malignantly was Rufus King, first sergeant of the M. P.'s.

Now Peters knew who Hickman had meant by "he."

And many other things were clear to him. He had been framed—not by Hickman but by King. King was the master mind, and he saw in the framing a way to get rid of and discredit an M. P. who might have become troublesome. As Hickman had said, King was truly a fiend, a diabolically clever one who, by reason of his position as first sergeant of M. P.'s, knew all their movements and plans, and thereby could carry on his degrading trade with security.

THE next morning, Captain Jackson summoned Private Peters, ex-M. P., to his office.

"Peters," began the officer, "first let me apologize to you."

Private Peters was silent. He was embarrassed. It was the first time an officer had ever apologized to him.

"I have here," the captain went on, lifting a paper from his desk, "an informal communication from Lieutenant McGovern, commander of the Naval S. P. Detachment. He sets forth the salient points of the capture of the dope ring that has been operating so long and so disastrously for our men.

"Need I say, Peters, that he states in detail and with great enthusiasm your part in the affair? He further states that what he writes in this informal letter is being made up into an official communication from the Naval District to the Commanding General, Panama Canal Department. I have a feeling that that will mean an official commendation, or perhaps a medal, for somebody."

"Yes, sir," said Peters respectfully. Captain Jackson's pause seemed to indicate that something was expected from him, but that was the best he could do.

"Peters," said the captain, with a grim twist to his mouth, "the M. P. Company is without a first sergeant. Will you take the job?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, sergeant. Draw your arm bands and other equipment, and take charge of the company."

First Sergeant Richard Peters, M. P., saluted.

THE END.

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Bombs were dropping as they crawled toward the enemy camp

Tama, Princess of Mercury

With half their number held captives by the invading gray hordes, the little group of Earthmen face a grim problem in the fantastic war of heat-rays and flying girl-warriors that rages on Mercury's metal desert

By RAY CUMMINGS

Author of " Tama of the Light Country," " The Snow Girl," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

A FEW days before their intended departure for Mercury in a space vehicle invented by Dr. Norton Grenfell, which he calls the Flying Cube, a party of seven are the victims of mysterious and horrible raids out of the sky. Their first warning is the disappearance of Jimmy Turk, one of the few men in the country who know the whereabouts of a much-talked-about pair from Mercury —Tama, a winged girl, and Toh, her brother.

On the same night in March, 1951, a great silver sphere descends from Mercury near their refuge in the Adirondacks, and Tama is kidnaped, as well as her companion and hostess, Rowena Dean. Grim preparations are at once made by Jack Dean, the husband of the kidnaped Rowena, and who tells the story, to pursue the raid-

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ing sphere in Dr. Grenfell's Flying Cube. With him go Tama's brother and his friend Guy Palisse, an Earth man who has lived on Mercury. Dr. Grenfell himself takes charge of the expedition.

As they draw near the fleeing sphere, Jack Dean projects himself to it in an airtight suit by means of gravity, and is admitted through an air lock. The sphere is in command of a Napoleon-like Mercutian named Roc, who raided the Earth to get Tama. His chief lieutenant—Dorrek—at once desires Rowena, which leads to intense jealousy on the part of Muta—a morose, gray woman from Dorrek's own Cold Country.

The Cold Country armies, in command of Roc, are preparing to invade the Light Country—Mercury's best lands—at once. Roc himself is a renegade from the Light Country. The captives see that he does not have the whole-hearted support of the Cold Country men, and that even on the space ship there is a threat of mutiny. Arriving at Mercury—a small, barren planet without real day or night, peopled by a race of small men and winged women—the party on the sphere witness the destruction of the Water City. The war is on.

On the sphere there follows a general mêlée, during which Tama, Jimmy and Roc fall overboard into a large body of water. Jimmy's leg is broken. Jack Dean and his wife Rowena are recaptured.

In the meantime the Flying Cube lands. As a representative of Earth, Dr. Grenfell is admitted to the council of the Light Country government and given a large hand in the preparations for war. He decides to take the offensive and attack the Cold Country men in their camp. Guy and Toh finally locate Tama, Jimmy and Roc and take them to the Hill City on a platform borne by flying girls.

CHAPTER XIII.

FLIGHT TO BATTLE.

AS it left the Hill City in the half-light of that noonday, the army of the Light Country consisted of two divisions: the forces on the ground and those in the air. Of the young men who marched on foot there were perhaps a thousand. It could have been more, but Grenfell decided against it.

Warfare is different in every age, and far more does it differ in one world from another. Grenfell was not officially in command—that was given to a Light Country scientist, one Arton. But the Hill City officials looked to Grenfell as actual leader. A set of conditions wholly strange was involved: electrical warfare. A battle of crossing rays; of blasting, withering heat. A single technician at a projector could do the work of a thousand soldiers.

But Grenfell knew that no warfare, however super-modern, scientific, mechanical, will ever transcend the human factor.

The young men to go on foot were not primarily fighters, but merely to transport the supplies. The food and water; the housing equipment for camping in the desert; the ammunition, electronic storage battery renewers, a renewal supply of the small hand weapons used by the air force. They carried a score of giant heat-ray projectors mounted upon little wheeled carts. Fifty additional carts were used for the supplies. They were drawn by domesticated brues.

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The thousand young men, commanded by Arton, were slow moving and needed supplies for their own maintenance. The number would have been unnecessarily large, save that Grenfell greatly feared Dorrek's giant insects, trained for fighting. It was likely that Dorrek, when attacked, might loose his brues over the desert with a few men guiding them to raid the vulnerable Hill City. This the ground army was prepared to oppose.

For defense, there was a black insulating fabric—a thin, flexible, cloth-like material, dead black in color, woven of hair-thin metallic thread. At a distance of thirty feet a man clothed in it could withstand the heat rays for many seconds. Garments and hoods were made of it, and shields of various sizes. But, like all devices of war, it was only partially effective.

The Light Country air forces were of three kinds. The individual flying girls, of whom there were some eight hundred. They could not fly properly encased in the insulated suits. Some wore them, but most chose their filmy robes and carried six-foot flexible shields, folded for long-distance flying, which could be opened in a moment. They wore belts with small ray projectors, knives and a variety of hand bombs to be thrown or dropped upon the enemy.

Tama was in command of these girls. There were eight divisions of about a hundred each. They flew in eight separate squads, each with its girl commander.

The second air division was that of the flying platforms, using from eight to thirty girls. The two largest carried a single giant projector each, which had an effective range of something like half a mile. Four Light Country men rode each of these platforms. Two others carried four men with bombs. Three bore merely a single girl each—reserve platforms.

One platform carried Jimmy and Roc. Guy had been assigned with them, but, perhaps because of his dislike for Roc, he persuaded Grenfell against it. He and Toh rode a platform together.

And there was the Flying Cube. It was loaded now with reserve armament: weapons, shields, fabric suits, food, medical equipment. It had a giant heat projector mounted now at a port on the D-Face deck; and the long-range Earth gun.

Grenfell rode in the Cube with his five associates. There were ten or fifteen Light Country men also now aboard the Cube, including four of the most skillful surgeons in the Hill City.

GRENFELL decided to go in advance and start the attack; the men on the ground could arrive as a reserve force later. Grenfell let the flying girls lead the way. He kept the Cube poised in the midst of them. They took it slowly, so that the girls would not be tired. Within a few minutes the queue of marching men upon the ground—the little swaying carts with harnessed insects slithering ahead of them—all were left behind, out of sight beneath the horizon.

The metal desert lay ahead. After twenty miles the girls descended to rest. The Cube sailed cautiously ahead to make sure no enemy was in sight, and then returned. The girls started again. Fantastic sight! They fluttered up, giant birds with vivid blue and crimson wings; flowing draperies; braided hair fastened to their sides; white limbs gracefully poised. Formed themselves into the eight squadrons, each with its leader; and followed by the flying platforms,

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winged swiftly off into the gathering twilight.

Jimmy, lying with his broken leg stiff in its splints, on his platform with Roc, gazed eagerly ahead. Two or three more stops and the mountains would come up over the forward horizon where it seemed a storm was gathering. Jimmy's mind was busy with still half formed personal plans. Grenfell had the big advantage over Dorrek in this coming battle. But Dorrek had one advantage, which to Jimmy was likely to prove a great handicap to Grenfell's activity.

For Rowena—and I, Jack Dean—were prisoners. It seemed to Grenfell likely that we would be kept confined in the silver ball. Dorrek would reason that Grenfell, fearing to kill us, would thus hesitate to attack the ball, his greatest weapon.

IT was a great handicap. Grenfell strode up and down the deck of the Cube that morning considering it, his shock of gray hair rumpled, his square-jawed face set in a frown, his shoulders hunched. Jimmy was lying in a deck chair regarding him.

"I don't know how to get them out of that sphere," murmured Grenfell. "We'll have to watch our chance when we get there." He was talking half to himself.

Jimmy called: "Oh, doc— I'm thinking the same thing you are. Once we have them safe, you can feel free to blow that blamed ball to bits. I've got a plan; will you listen?"

"Of course."

"Well, we don't know yet what conditions we're liable to meet. But let us assume we take these savages by surprise. My idea is we'll have them penned in the mountains. They'll be on the defensive, won't they? And the ball will be lying inside—well, what you'd call the enemy lines. And it will be black night. Right?"

"Jimmy, I have no means of guessing what the conditions will be. But I know one condition I'm afraid of—what these girls may do when they get in contact with the enemy. Eight hundred of them—supposed to be under my control. But they won't be! How can I control them? I've no adequate means of communication with them during a battle. A few flying platforms to take my orders!"

Grenfell was vehement. "Your description of how those girls fought that giant insect—that brue thing—in the Water City. Reckless! Never let up till they had it torn to shreds, and then collapsed into hysteria when it was over. If they get wild, if I can't control them—the whole eight hundred could kill themselves in half an hour!"

"Tama can control them, doc."

"I hope so. I've spoken to her. She stared at me with that little quizzical smile. 'Oh, yes, doctor, we will be prudent. We look to you to tell us what to do.' That sounds fine. But—"

Jimmy interrupted. "What I was saying; my idea is we'll have these savages penned in the mountains. You're not going to attack at once. Make the girls take it slow; that will help control 'em. It will be dark, won't it?"

"So I understand."

"Abnormally dark. Roc tells me this sky looks as though a black storm were coming. And a cold one, from the Night Country. Well, my idea is to watch my chance—get my platform up close to the enemy lines. Wear a black insulator suit, and creep through the lines. Get up to the ball—unseen, why not? And the doorway would probably be open—"

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"But, Jimmy, you can't walk with that leg."

"I can creep, can't I? I may have no chance, after the fighting starts, to consult with you. I want your permission, now. It might be the lives of Rowena and Jack—and it might make all the difference between your losing or winning the battle. You want those barbarians coming to the Earth again—assaulting, abducting young girls like they did last year? If I get Rowena and Jack—you'll be free to blow that ball to bits. Chances are that Dorrek and all the leaders will be in it."

Grenfell hesitated; then he put his hands on Jimmy's shoulders and gazed into the flushed, freckled face with the tousled, brick-red hair above it.

"Do what you think best, Jimmy. Only—don't get killed."

As Grenfell stood up, Jimmy saw Roc standing a short distance down the length of dimly illumined deck. He had come from a near-by door, or perhaps he had been standing there unobserved for some time. Jimmy called:

"Oh, Roc—come here."

Roc was to be his companion on the platform. Jimmy was by nature impulsive, and he was keyed up, excited now. He gave Roc the general idea of his plan.

"Suppose we try it together, Roc. You'd be a great help if we should get stopped by any of Dorrek's men, since you can talk their language."

A secretary came up with a question which distracted Grenfell's attention. Roc said quietly:

"We are riding together. Plenty of time to talk it over later, Turk."

Roc turned to Grenfell. "Tama would like to see you for a moment, Dr. Grenfell. Some question about shields for the girls."

"Oh— Yes, Roc."

He and Roc hurried away, leaving Jimmy alone, nursing his leg, pondering his plan.

And he was still pondering it, when in the midst of the cloud of flying girls, he rode the platform with Roc—the metallic desert beneath them, and overhead the lowering black sky. A black storm was coming.

Roc was stretched now at the platform stern, Jimmy was in front. At the handles jutting out, their girls flew, seven on each side. Only one of them spoke English, and hers was very limited. A girl named Grazia. She flew at the left-hand leading position, her wing stroke setting the beat for the others. Her small, earnest face, flushed with exertion, was only a few feet from Jimmy's. Occasionally, as she turned to glance at him, he would smile and nod to her. Or call a cheering jovial encouragement. The girls of this crew all seemed to like Jimmy. But they obviously did not like Roc.

At last, far ahead against the dark horizon, the black peaks of the mountains loomed up.

LIKE a great gash in the tumbled mountainous ridge wound the black cañon. Its smooth metallic walls were for the most part sheerly perpendicular, a thousand feet high. It was narrow, frequently curving in broad sweeps, or again turning sharply. In places it was five hundred feet wide, in others less than two hundred.

The walls were eroded with lateral ridges, one above the other as though left by nature to mark the ages of the drying river which once had surged through here. In the heart of the Dark Mountains, the cañon widened abruptly into a great irregularly shaped bowl, where once a lake must have been. Nearly circular, it was some six miles

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in diameter. A broken, ridged floor of strewn bowlders, gullies and ravines, surrounded by sheer circular walls like a crater rim, broken and jagged on top.

In this great bowl, Dorrek had set his encampment. His forces were arriving from the upper cañon entrance at the Cold Country side; and it was from the lower cañon entrance that Grenfell and his army approached. Grenfell learned afterward that Dorrek's force was already almost complete. What few came later, seeing the distant conflict, undoubtedly turned back and fled.

As Jimmy rode his swaying platform, winging low over the narrowing black cañon, he could see very little of the region's formation. It was now almost black night. The Cube had sailed ahead. Twenty girls had gone cautiously with the Cube. They came winging back, flying in broken formation, scattering to the flying platforms and to the leaders of the various corps of girls with Grenfell's orders.

Jimmy and Roc saw the alarm given long before their platform arrived upon the scene. Light flares bursting in the distance, illumining the black sky and the towering jagged mountain peaks. The steady, rumbling hiss of giant projectors.

Jimmy thought that the attack had already begun. The Cube came sailing back, high overhead, turned in a ten-mile semicircle, and swept forward again.

One of the largest platforms carrying a huge projector with four men to operate it dropped down and landed upon the cañon rim at the entrance to the six-mile bowl. The cañon here was no more than two hundred feet wide. The projector, mounted upon the rim, would dominate this exit.

Half of Grenfell's force landed at this point. The other half, including Jimmy and Roc, swept a mile back to the left, avoiding the open bowl. Jimmy saw great shafts of blue-green light rays standing like searchlight beams into the air—a circular curtain of deadly light in the center of the bowl.

Jimmy and Roc, following orders, flew in a wide detour to the left and landed on the crater rim, where the cañon stretched off toward the Cold Country. There were a few of Dorrek's guards on the top of these walls, but at once they scattered and fled.

DORREK was now trapped in the rocky bowl. As Grenfell had foreseen, he went instantly upon the defensive. When the alarm came, the silver ball had been resting at the bottom of the valley near one of its side walls. Dorrek immediately moved it to the center of the bowl, three miles from the nearest of the enclosing cliffs.

Two hours passed, horribly irksome to the waiting Jimmy.

Near the top of the thousand-foot precipice at the opening to the valley, Grenfell's encampment was springing into existence on a bowlder-strewn plateau. The Cube had landed upon a near-by rocky eminence which dominated the scene. The men and the four hundred girls unloaded the Cube's supply of tents, lights, cables, batteries and light mechanisms; the food supplies; weapons and defensive armament.

Within an hour the tents and lights were erected. A little huddled group of dark-fabric shelters, strewn amid the rocks. Fantastic camp here in the darkness! Tiny hooded green lights dotted it, their dim radiance disclosing the figures of the winged girls moving busily about. The first meal was in preparation.

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Jimmy called to Roc as the Mercutian laboriously hauled the base section of a projector to a spot where some one had said it should be taken.

"How far is the brink from here? I'm going there."

Roc answered his smile. "Of course, Turk." He called a passing girl, instructed her to have the projector assembled. "Very well, Turk. Come put your arm on my shoulder."

Jimmy found that he could almost hobble. He weighed hardly sixty pounds here on Mercury. With his arm over Roc's shoulders, they made a fair speed, passing beyond the lights of the camp, heading to the near-by brink where they could see over the valley.

Fragments of information which Roc had picked up he now gave Jimmy. Dorrek was caught in the valley. His men and brues were down there clustered around the silver ball. In all, they occupied a space of about a mile-wide circle, out in the center of the valley. There was no projector in either camp which could reach the other.

On the heights of the lower cañon entrance, Grenfell's second camp was being established. There was no way for Dorrek's men and brues to get out of the valley without passing through one of these two narrow gorges, both of which Grenfell's projectors now dominated.

Across the dark rocky distance, in the direction of the Light Country, Jimmy thought he could distinguish the tiny lights of the other camp six miles away. Overhead a small group of girls winged off in that direction.

"Look!" exclaimed Roc suddenly.

They turned. Behind them, in the darkness a mile back on this upper plateau, was turmoil. Vague blurred sounds in the heavy, motionless night air. Tiny flashes of blue-green light—little beams leaping down, crossing with others leaping up. It lasted only a moment or two. The beams were extinguished; the sounds died. Jimmy learned afterward that a small group of armed girls, flying to investigate the surrounding country, had come upon a few of Dorrek's lurking men. And a brue. The men and the brue were killed, and three of the girls.

Grenfell now established patrols for all this neighborhood. At intervals they passed overhead, flying low with their search-beams sweeping the crags.

It was a painfully long hobble for Jimmy, but at last he and Roc came to the brink of the cliff. In the center of the valley Dorrek had set up a ring of giant projectors, a mile in diameter, within which his army was enclosed. They were pointed directly upward, spreading beams of blue-green. At a few hundred feet above the ground they crossed, mingled into a solid curtain of light, a circular, mile-wide upstanding funnel.

It was queerly non-radiant, this barrage; inherently blue-green, but it did not illumine the valley. The rocky floor, even close to where the projectors were set, was solid black. Nor did it radiate much heat. Within the beams of that thin, glowing curtain, the temperature must have been several thousand degrees centigrade. Forty times the boiling point of water perhaps. But twenty feet away, its heat could scarcely be felt.

The effective height of this heat barrage was two miles, or less. The Cube could sail over it, drop a bomb, blow the Mercutian ball to bits.

Jimmy's thoughts raced. At the base of the barrage curtain, where the spreading beams came from the projectors, there were triangular holes of

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unprotected darkness. Five hundred feet on the rocks, narrowing to the point where the beams met overhead. Into those triangular holes Grenfell could fire his long-range Earth gun. Through one of those black spaces Jimmy could creep—up to the silver ball. A vague glow of light seemed to disclose the round silver shape of the ball lying in the center of the encampment.

Jimmy had conceived that Dorrek's barrage was immovable. The holes in it would be so easy to penetrate! But within a minute he saw that was not so. One of the projectors swung suddenly forward. Its beam swept the empty valley floor, almost reached the base of the cliff; darted sidewise, then upward and back to its former position. It made Jimmy shudder. Nothing living could have withstood the briefest touch of that faint lurid glow.

Grenfell's projector at the cañon mouth presently sent down an answering beam. Its source was along the cliff top not far from where Roc and Jimmy were crouching. Its range was something near a mile; it swept the near-by valley floor, dominated the exit, but could not reach Dorrek's projectors. After a moment it was extinguished.

"The storm is coming," said Roc.

"A black storm?"

"Yes."

The clouds overhead were shot with occasional turgid yellow shafts. They illumined the valley far more than did the enemy barrage beams. The air here on the cliff was cold. A little wind had sprung up fitfully.

"We had better go back," Roc added. "The storm may burst now, or in an hour or two."

"Soon, Roc."

Presently, as an experiment, Grenfell tried a shot from the long-range Earth gun on the deck of the Cube. But Dorrek's men were alert. The gun spat yellow; instantly one of the barrage projectors bent downward. The shell went into the beam, exploded harmlessly in mid-flight over the valley.

"I'M going down there," Jimmy said suddenly. "Roc, you've got to help me. Get our platform—assemble our girls. We're going down." In the darkness he could not see Roc's face.

"Yes. I will try."

"Now listen—" A sudden thought struck Jimmy. "If you see Guy and Toh, tell them what we're doing. Maybe they'd like to come—"

If only Jimmy had insisted upon that!

Roc was on his feet. In the darkness Jimmy could only hear his voice. "Very well. You wait here. If I see Tama, I will ask her to come. Down there in the darkness, if trouble should come, we could send Tama quickly up for help."

As Jimmy hesitated, Roc added vehemently: "I am not one who would want Tama placed into danger. But just to land in the darkness down there—not too dangerous."

"O. K. Hurry it."

Jimmy sat alone on the cliff top through another interval. Staring down at the distant enemy barrage. The projectors could not sweep the ground since their long range would annihilate the projector next in line, he noticed.

Suddenly he saw a hand heat beam dart sidewise from near one of the projectors. It swept the ground with a range of nearly a hundred feet. And a guard at the neighboring projector

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answered it with a similar horizontal beam.

Jimmy smiled grimly. That was not so good. But his fabric suit might withstand that smaller beam. He would have to chance it.

His attention was distracted by the beat of wings close over his head. Roc arriving with their platform? But it was not. Another platform, seven girls on each of its sides, went sailing past. Fifty feet over Jimmy, and twice that far beyond the brink of the cliff top. Two men were crouching on the platform.

A sudden silent burst of yellow-red radiance in the sky briefly illumined them. Guy and Toh! They did not see Jimmy. He stood up impulsively, cursed his leg, and hastily sat down again.

The platform winged away, but Jimmy did not lose sight of it. Heading off toward Grenfell's other camp. But it rose steeply and presently came back. Then in a broad spiral, almost directly over Jimmy's head, it mounted.

Grenfell was making another test. The platform was a mere dot against the turgid sky. Great funnel-shaped clouds were slowly wheeling up there. Queer green and yellow shafts occasionally burst in them.

The platform rose steadily. A mile? Two miles? Twelve or fifteen thousand feet? Then Jimmy realized: Guy and Toh were trying to fly across the top of the barrage curtain. To test the height; to try and drop a bomb.

The little dot up there began moving out over the valley. Obviously Dorrek's men saw it. There was a movement of all the barrage beams. They turned diagonally inward, closing at the top almost together in a blurred mingled glow.

The platform crossed over them. The falling bomb was invisible to Jimmy at first. But he saw it strike the upper reaches of the barrage funnel. A glowing point of light. Its metal shell turning luminous. The heat was weak at first. But in a second or two the falling dot of fire burst into a puff of flame. A tiny report echoed over the silent valley. The platform came sailing back, descending well behind Jimmy, lost in the darkness of the upper plateau.

A RUSH of wings sounded behind Jimmy. His platform, complete with its crew of fourteen girls, landed near the brink.

Jimmy saw Roc and Tama dismounting it.

They came toward him. Tama greeted him:

"Jimmy, you must not try this thing. Roc has told me—"

He waved away her protests.

"Don't worry, Tama—I'm no cripple. I'm sparing myself now—you wait till you see how I can make speed when I have to. You going with us, Tama?"

"Yes," said Roc quietly. "For a little way."

They mounted the platform. Jimmy saw three knives, three small hand cylinders and a flash light in the weapon rack. And a pile of garments—the black insulated suits.

"There is a cloak and hood for Tama," said Roc. "But in flying it cannot protect the wings."

The little leading girl, Grazia, was beside Jimmy. The platform was raised, ready for launching.

She leaned toward him. Her face was white and earnest. There was fear in her eyes, but her jaw was set with determination. All the other girls were

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watching her. She said, in an undertone:

"You instruct us where we go, Jimmy."

"Start us off, Grazia. Down to the valley—keep close to the cliff, right along here on this side. Understand me?"

"Yes. I take orders from you or Tama. Not Roc."

The platform lifted, swayed over the brink and swooped downward.

CHAPTER XIV.

NO MAN'S LAND.

JIMMY headed them down the valley; a mile, possibly. They landed on the dark rocky floor close to the foot of the cliff. It was far darker than above. There was no wind down here. But the heavy air was dank and chill. The girls were shivering from cold and from excitement.

Jimmy and Roc had donned the black suits. Jimmy carried a knife, a cylinder and the little flash light. His suit encased him from feet to neck, and to the tips of his gloved fingers. His hood, with flexible-paneled visor, dangled now at his back.

Tama donned her cloak. It covered her wings for walking, but was slitted so that for flying her wings could come through it. The three of them stood whispering.

"Roc, did any one know we started?" demanded Jimmy.

Roc stood apart, waiting. "No," he answered.

"Well, we're all right so far. I want the platform to take us as near as we dare go." Jimmy explained it to Grazia. "Pick out a gully or something, where you can hide while you wait for me."

It seemed that Roc hesitated. Tama turned to him abruptly.

"We will do what he says."

The platform fluttered cautiously forward, landed in a little depression like a pit. The enemy line was near at hand. The barrage loomed up, a huge, glowing veil. They left the platform hidden. Tama stayed with it.

"We haven't been seen," Jimmy whispered. "You wait here. We may come back in a rush, Tama." He gripped her slim shoulders. "I hope to God we have Rowena and Jack with us!"

"Come," whispered Roc.

He helped Jimmy for a short distance. The barrage curtain seemed almost overhead. But there was no light from it here on the rocky surface. The loose bowlders were often ten or twenty feet high. Jimmy and Roc made their way cautiously forward. They were heading into the dark space between two of the projectors.

Jimmy pulled up his hood. "We'd better get lower. Crawl. I can make it."

They crept on. Jimmy, without thought of the pain, found he could drag his abnormally slight weight swiftly forward. Roc crept behind him. After a time, Jimmy was winded. He paused for breath, then went on. The nearest projector was some two hundred feet to the left of him. Occasionally it was hidden by intervening crags. The other, to the right, lay obscured below a little upstanding ridge.

There was no alarm, though every moment Jimmy feared it might come. Every bowlder might have been a lurking guard in the blackness beside it.

Soon Jimmy figured he was within the enemy line. The barrage curtain closed in a great sweeping arc over his

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head. The left hand projector was a trifle behind him now; in the dim light from it he could see the dark forms of its attendants.

Ahead, the broken, ridged surface went down a gentle slope. Shapes were down there. Straggling tents, the outposts of the camp. He saw a group of moving lights.

ABRUPTLY Jimmy realized that Roc was not with him! He waited, stretched out, panting, gazing back. Roc had been following, but he was gone now. Afraid! Deserted —gone back to the girls—

A grin was on Jimmy's face. He rested a few moments, then dragged himself on. In Jimmy's mind there had been no thought of how he might get Rowena out of Dorrek's clutches. He told himself now he would decide that when the time came. The first thing was to get to the Mercutian vehicle and into it.

There was a commotion ahead, men dragging a projector across the camp. Their small hand lights showed. Jimmy rolled into a little crevice between two bowlders and rested until they had passed. He was well within the lines now.

Overhead he could see the green-yellow sky. Frequent lightning flares now. A dim, queerly muffled thunderclap. And a wind was surging over the valley. The storm was at hand.

He saw, too, that a distant section of the barrage was moving. Out from the camp, toward the valley wall. Three or four of the projectors were being rolled outward. It was a mile away, but the movement was obvious.

The camp showed distant activity. Dorrek was starting something. Jimmy lay with pounding heart, watching. The barrage was moving toward the cliff, in the direction of the cañon entrance where Grenfell had established his girls, and the Cube.

An enemy rocket mounted from a point on the valley floor less than a mile from Jimmy. The barrage parted to let it pass. It went in an arc upward. Through the brief blank hole in the barrage Jimmy saw it clearly; it fell on the cliff. Burst with a puff of light, and from it came a turgid ball of smoke. Gas fumes! They clung heavily to the cliff top—a little widening cloud. The wind which now was up there caught the fumes. Blew them back over the plateau.

Grenfell's projectors were sweeping the near-by rocks. The Cube fired a shot. It came screaming down, went into the barrage and burst in mid-air.

The battle had begun. A sudden activity everywhere. From the faraway cliff top girls were rising, dropping bombs to dissipate the approaching gas fumes.

Jimmy came to himself to realize that whatever he could do must be done now. He crept on forward. He had forgotten Dorrek's brues, the gruesome giant insects. With a shudder that turned him cold, he saw one slithering across the camp with a man driving it.

They did not see him. Other men passed; he rolled into a tiny hollow and lay breathless as their feet and legs showed, passing almost over his head. Legs garbed in a woolly brown fur. He waited a moment or two after they were gone, raised himself up on his hands to gaze cautiously out of the hollow.

From the near-by darkness two fur-robed figures were advancing! Jimmy ducked back, fumbling for his knife; he could not risk a ray flash which would give the alarm.

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But he was too late! A giant man came with a leap upon him!

TAMA crouched in the ravine with the platform and the fourteen other girls. Ten minutes passed. Every instant she feared to hear the sound of alarm within the enemy camp. It was a mad, desperate attempt. She was sorry she had not tried harder to restrain Jimmy.

A dark form showed at the brink of the ravine. These girls were not armed, except Tama, who carried a knife and a ray cylinder. The little projector was in her hand; but before she could level it, a soft warning voice came from the arriving figure.

"Tama!"

It was Roc. He slid down into the ravine, greeting Tama in their native language.

"All is well, Tama."

His black hood dangled to his shoulders, exposing his pale face. In his hand he held his cylinder. He fronted Tama and the girls, with his back to the gully side.

"But where is Jimmy Turk?" Tama lowered her weapon. "What happened, Roc? Why did you return?"

"He goes on in." Roc laughed, harsh as the grind of a file rasping on steel. "I let him go. Why not? They will catch him, of course. Kill him... Look there!"

His swift gesture made Tama and most of the other girls turn around. There was nothing to see. Tama felt Roc leap upon her. His hands tore away her cylinder, jerked her knife from her belt, and flung her to the platform.

"Quiet, all of you!" His weapon swept the girls, menacing. His voice hissed at them. "If you do not want me to kill your Tama, do as I tell you! Take your places at the handles. We are going up. Lie still, you— By the god of light, I'm in no mood to fool with you, Tama." He shoved her to the forward end of the platform. "If you try to fly off, my beam will kill you. I mean it."

"Roc! Are your senses gone?"

"No. I've just got them... Grazia, start us up. To any one of you who dares to leave your place—it is death! I mean it!"

The white, frightened girls lifted the platform. Roc crouched in its stern, facing forward. Tama huddled tense, watching him. His weapon was leveled. It swept the girls, came back upon her.

"To the nearest cliff top, Grazia. Low at first—down, you fool! Do you want us to be seen? The barrage to turn on us—shrivel us to ashes?"

They skimmed low over the valley, back toward the cliff. Tama, facing the rear, could see the enemy lines over Roc's crouching form. The barrage, on its distant side, was moving outward. Activity in the enemy camp. Was Jimmy caught? She feared so. She saw the rocket mount to the cliff. Saw Grenfell answer with a shot.

Roc chuckled. "Out of it, just in time."

The girls were flying in frightened disorder. He warned them. They flew more evenly. The platform ascended, reached the plateau at a point some two miles from Grenfell's upper camp. It passed above the cliff at an altitude of a few hundred feet; sailed back over the dark empty reaches of the upper plain. Flew swiftly, the panic-stricken girls menaced by Roc's weapon and his grim threats.

The lights and sounds of the battle faded into the distance. Ahead lay the black desolate fastnesses of the

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mountains, with the bursting storm upon them. The sky was lurid now with shafts of red and yellow light splitting the cloud funnels. Rain was falling, tossed by a crazy wind.

ROC had not moved from his crouching place in the platform stern. The red lightning flares painted his livid face, the Satanic peak of hair on his forehead, his blazing dark eyes.

Tama said abruptly out of the silence: "Are you mad, Roc? Where are you taking us?"

Roc laughed again, but calmly now, and shifted his tense position. But he was still alert with his weapon.

"Back home. The Cave City, where you will be safe, Tama, in the Cold Country until this fighting is over. Dorrek will win, I hope. These fool, meddling Earthmen—I wish them all to their hell. And I have you—that is all I want."

"But I thought—" Her protest sounded so futile. She checked it. And then her heart leaped into her throat. Over Roc's shoulder, in the lurid darkness behind them, it seemed that she saw a following shape. She forced herself to speak; to hold Roc's attention. Keep him from turning to gaze back.

"But, Roc, I thought—"

"You thought I was going to plunge into a battle? Get killed! Or have you tell me you love that accursed Earthman, Guy Palisse."

"I never said I loved him, Roc."

"Do you?"

"Or do I love you? Is this the way to make me love you? Trickery once more. Traitor, again."

The blob behind them was coming closer. Overtaking them. Another flying platform.

"Perhaps it is the way to make you love me," Roc retorted. "We shall see. I do not want you to be killed. I'm taking you to safety."

"Or is it for yourself you most fear?" she demanded. "You are despicable, Roc. A traitor—a lying little coward—"

The girls at the handles showed a sudden confusion. They had seen the pursuing platform; two or three of them were looking backward.

It attracted Roc's attention. He turned; and Tama would have leaped upon him but he was too quick for her.

"Back! Sit quiet! You, Grazia—a faster stroke!"

But the girls, though they pretended to do their best, were faltering. Roc did not dare turn his head again; he moved forward, almost upon Tama, with his cylinder leveled at her breast. He called to the girls:

"Faster! Do you want me to kill her?"

The other platform was now barely a hundred feet behind them. Coming at far greater speed. It suddenly began ascending, to pass over them. The wind had momentarily lulled, but now it came again. A roaring blast. The platform swayed, lurched as the girls fought to hold it.

Roc shouted, "Faster—you fools!"

The wind tore at his words and hurled them away. A crimson flare in the sky illumined the other platform clearly. Two men were upon it. Triumph swept Tama. It was Guy and Toh! They were in a moment close behind, rising to a fifty foot higher level. Tama could presently see only the black insulated bottom of the platform, the winged shapes of its girls around it, and a face projecting beyond its forward edge. The face of her brother Toh, staring down.

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Roc was crouching on one knee.

"Faster!"

Grazia, flying close at Tama's side, had looked up and seen Toh. Caught a signal from his hand over the edge of his platform. Guy was leaning over the side, trying to aim down at Roc. Both platforms were lurching; he could not make sure of any aim.

Grazia suddenly left her handle and with folded wings dropped into the void. It distracted Roc, as she had intended. He leaned sidewise; his weapon spat its small deadly beam. But it missed Grazia's falling body; her wings opened, she flew away and vanished.

The lower platform wavered dangerously, all its girls in a panic of confusion. And then Toh leaped over the forward edge of the upper platform. He came hurtling down the fifty-foot space with a knife in his outstretched hand.

Roc forgot Tama. He turned his cylinder upward. Fired.

Toh's body crashed upon Roc. Toh's knife stabbed. One convulsive blow.

On the swaying platform under Tama's horrified gaze, the bodies of the two men lay writhing in last agonies, and then were still.

CHAPTER XV.

TRAPPED.

ROWENA and I might have escaped from the silver ball that time when Muta smuggled the brown-furred garments to us. She was ready to distract the attention of the guards. But the alarm came. Grenfell's Cube was sighted, sailing high over the valley. Dorrek's encampment sprang into confusion. He rushed in to us.

"You stay here with Rowena. We move the ball—not safe here."

Rowena had barely time to hide our robes in her bed covering. Muta stood against the wall. Dorrek whirled around and was gone.

Our futile plans! Escape was impossible now. Men were clattering everywhere in the small vehicle's interior. The guards still held their position at the foot of the ladder. And other men were constantly upon it. The upper-tier rooms near us were occupied—men in the control rooms, which had hastily been unsealed. The lower door was closed. The ball lifted; the thrum of its rocket-stream ejectors sounded amid the turmoil of footsteps and voices.

I had thought that the battle was bursting around us; but almost at once I saw that it was not. Rowena and I stood at the small window oval. She had loosened the ropes which hampered me. But Dorrek had not noticed, or had not cared.

Muta came like a shadow and stood behind us. The ball had been resting within a hundred feet of the valley's precipitous wall. Our window had faced that way; and all the main encampment was behind us, out in the open valley. As we lifted now, we had a wider vista. The ball rose not over two hundred feet, sailed outward from the cliff, then backed into the center of the valley some three miles from the nearest cliff and came to rest again on the rocks.

We were now in the center of the encampment. I saw its turmoil of alarm. Men dragging projectors with cables slithering after them like giant snakes. Brues harnessed to small carts loaded with storage batteries.

Tents were set up in straggling array on the rocky floor. Fabric tents,

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mound-shaped; clusters of men about them; illumined by tiny lights strung from metal poles. And houses which had been built of gathered loose stones, crudely piled in tiers, with skins and fabric cloth stretched for a roof.

Many of the giant projectors were ready. Dorrek had at least half expected this alarm. Within ten minutes after he had sighted the Cube, his great circular barrage was springing up around him. The flare of their upstanding beams, the hiss of them, was what I had mistaken for an attack.

The camp occupied a mile-wide circle, and within half an hour the barrage was complete around it. From our second-tier window we presently saw tiny distant lights which marked the coming of Grenfell's force.

This was perhaps an hour after the first alarm. Around us the activity went on. The barrage was constantly being strengthened, reserve protectors dragged to the circular line, reserve batteries for renewal. There seemed hordes of fur-clad men.

Hand weapons were being distributed. A hundred brues went past, lashed by their drivers, slithering off toward a section of the barrage. Still no attack came from Grenfell.

HERE in the ball I stood alert, waiting for an opportunity to get away with Rowena. But always there seemed too many men moving around this upper tier and the incline. But once out into the confusion of the camp, clad like these other furred men, our chances might be better now than before.

"Soon, Rowena," I whispered. "If this upper corridor is cleared, even for a moment—"

Muta held stolidly to her decision to help us.

"I watch at the door." She stood there, motionless.

At last she signaled. "Now!"

But a dozen men came tramping up from below, rummaging in the room adjoining us. I saw the flare and heard the scream of Grenfell's test shot, and then the bursting of a bomb overhead. The conflict was beginning. We must escape, now if ever.

There seemed renewed activity in a distant section of the camp. Men marching in that direction. Groups of the giant insects—and all the reserve projectors, and mechanisms for the launching of rockets and bombs—all seemed being taken now to one segment of the barrage line. Was Dorrek preparing an offensive move off there? It seemed so.

The little upper corridor was momentarily vacant. I joined Muta.

"We will try it now?"

She nodded. "Yes. I go down."

There were only two guards at the foot of the incline. Muta started down to them. I hastened back to Rowena.

"The robes—hurry, dear."

Some one might at any moment come up to us—men had been in and out at brief intervals. We donned the robes, pulled the hoods over our heads, close against our faces. Our stature, if we were closely remarked, was a danger. Rowena was taller than most of these men. And I had no counterpart save Dorrek.

We crept to the ladder. Muta had drawn the guards aside. My heart was pounding with the sudden fear that now at the last, the inscrutable Mercutian woman would betray us. But she did not. She was talking with low, passionate words to the two guards. What she said, we never knew. They saw us, perhaps, as we slipped past but she held their attention.

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We reached the lower doorway. Men were near by, working at some apparatus. We walked, stooping. The doorway was open.

A six-foot ladder descended into the dim activity of the camp. I was upon it, with Rowena behind me. The dark forms of men were outside. They would see us; but men had been passing in and out of the vehicle constantly —in our brown fur robes we would not attract particular notice.

A cylinder weapon was in my hand. But I realized that a shot would bring the camp upon us. I stuffed the cylinder back into the pocket of the robe; unclasped a long knife blade.

"Jack! Hurry! Some one's coming behind us!"

I had paused in the doorway, making sure of what was below. I tensed to jump down, but the dark moving form of a brue was disclosed. I could not chance passing near it, to have it sense me as an enemy.

"Rowena—this way!"

I pushed her back through the doorway. The room inside was dim. Footsteps were upon us! We shrank against the wall. But we could be seen.

"Stoop down low," I whispered.

A PILE of apparatus lay by the doorway. We bent over it, pretending to be working. The voices of men in the adjoining room were audible.

"Jack—can't we get out?"

"A brue outside. I didn't dare—just a minute!"

"Some one is coming!"

I saw Rowena's white hand, and gripped it. I felt then, with horrible premonition, that in another moment we would be challenged. We could not answer—neither of us could speak Mercutian. A challenge meant discovery. For a brief instant I held Rowena's hand. My wife, and I had her for so short a time. With freedom ahead of us, all my thoughts had gone to the future. The world—our blessed Earth—so wonderful a place, with Rowena. Was this to be the end of our life together, trapped here in this dark room, in the depths of the mountains of a strange planet?

The footsteps were upon us. The brue had stopped almost at the foot of the entrance ladder.

"Rowena—leap over it! We'll have to chance it!"

Run openly, with our great Earth strides through the camp? Or stay here ten seconds longer and be discovered? It flashed upon me that the choice I must make held all the difference between life and death.

I suddenly drew Rowena back from the doorway.

What destiny held me? In that second of decision, what benign fate made me choose rightly? What vagary of that mysterious thing we call the mind guided my uncertain muscles? Life is a queer business!

The brue reared itself on the ladder. Half a dozen men appeared behind the startled giant insect. It sensed us, no doubt. The men lashed at it; one jabbed with a pronged pole, and sullenly it slithered back to the ground, and the men drove it away.

In the room, the approaching footsteps brought a heavy shape directly toward us. It was Muta!

She touched me. "You go now! I want never see you again!"

I could well subscribe to that. Rowena bent down.

"Muta," she whispered, "thank you for this. I wish you happiness."

No one was near the ladder. We descended it. I caught a glimpse of the

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face of the Cold Country woman as she stood watching us go.

We moved slowly into the dim activity of the camp. I had carefully decided which way to head. We half encircled the outside of the vehicle, threaded our way between two dark tent shelters and made off over the rocks toward the distant barrage line.

"Carefully, Rowena." I walked beside her, whispering. "Hold your balance." For the slight gravity and our tense impatience made it difficult to keep from running. "If we're challenged, stand perfectly still. I'll do what I can."

The barrage line seemed horribly far ahead of us across a dark, rocky expanse. But this was the least occupied, least active section of the encampment. All the movement was the other way.

Soon we were past the thickest clusters of the tents. We came to an almost unoccupied spread of bowlder-strewn floor.

"Now, faster!"

We took longer, freer steps. Soon we were running, pausing momentarily to look around. A line of brues showed in advance of us. We waited to let it go by. Overhead the storm was bursting into greater violence. Whirlpools of a crazy wind plucked at us. It was presently raining a little.

The barrage line came nearer. I headed toward the space between two of the giant projectors. The attendants at them showed clearly, dark shapes of three or four men at each.

"Jack, look!"

Behind us, far across the camp, the opposite segment of the barrage was moving outward. Dorrek beginning an offensive. We saw the gas bomb mount and break upon the cliff top. The stab of Grenfell's projectors up there. A shot from the Cube came screaming down and burst against the barrage. Girls over the cliff were dropping bombs to neutralize and dissipate the gas fumes.

We ran. A man driving a brue crossed in front of us. We waited, crouching in the crevice of an overhanging rock. Started again. We were not far from the barrage line—soon we would have the two projectors behind us. The rocky surface here was broken with numerous little gullies and hollows. We jumped most of them, sailing in huge fantastic leaps.

"Wait!"

I drew Rowena down barely in time to avoid discovery. Four men passed close to us. Again we started. A small hollow lay immediately before us. And as we approached, a black figure rose from it. Saw us! Dropped back out of sight. I expected a shot. We were too close to run. With a leap I was over the brink of the little pit.

THE black figure struck at me with a knife, but I avoided the blow and saw a white face.

"Jimmy!"

He was lying here with his broken leg, trying desperately to crawl across the enemy camp to rescue us. There was moisture in Rowena's eyes, a catch in her voice as she joined us in the pit. We rested a moment, whispered to each other. Triumphant. We would soon be out of this. Tama was near by, with a flying platform.

"All right, now," Jimmy murmured. "How glad I am you aren't in the sphere! It's been holding up this fight." He was trembling with eagerness and triumph. "Fearful handicap for Grenfell—come on—we've got to get out—get back to Grenfell. Things are starting off there already."

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We crawled forward, but we did not get far. The camp, in advance of us and to the sides, burst into a sudden chaos. Bombs were dropping from overhead. One of them exploded within the camp. Outside the barrage, girls were attacking.

"Heck!" muttered Jimmy. "We can't get out now."

I gathered him in my arms. He was incredibly light, as though I were holding a child. I ran, with Rowena beside me. But it was useless. A light flare came down from overhead and struck the ground near us. For a second or two the rocks were painted white with the dazzling glare. I stumbled and fell. Jimmy kept his wits; he reached and drew Rowena down with us.

We lay in a cluster of bowlders against which we huddled for shelter. And over us, with amazing suddenness, the battle raged in full fury.

We were trapped. The storm and the conflict were both at their height. How long we three lay there I have no idea. I could not guess the progress of the battle; I only knew that every moment a more lurid inferno seemed around us.

Rowena suddenly whispered, "Where is Jimmy?"

I realized that she and I were alone! Jimmy had crawled away from us!

CHAPTER XVI.

BATTLE FURY.

GRENFELL, during all this time, found himself in an increasing dilemma. He knew that once he ordered these flying virgins to the attack, the conflict would be sharp and brief.

But Grenfell had no intention of precipitating such a crisis. Dorrek's forces were bottled; by exhaustion of his food supplies he could be overcome. And there was the question of electronic power. It seemed probable that Dorrek could not maintain this huge barrage for many hours. Inevitably his batteries would be exhausted.

In a day-cycle Commander Arton would be coming up the cañon with the reënforcements, a thousand young men, upon whom Grenfell preferred the brunt of the conflict to fall. An attack now by the flying girls would be too deadly—the losses too great.

But Grenfell finally sent the two largest flying platforms to an altitude of fifteen thousand feet. Each carried a giant projector. The rays spat down; crossed the barrage curtain with a hissing turmoil of sparks.

Coming back, one of the platforms abruptly disobeyed orders. Four men manned its long-range ray; thirty girls flew it. Instead of returning to Grenfell's camp on the cliff, it dropped low into the valley and hurled itself at one of the base projectors of the barrage. The projector bent its ray down, but missed. The platform went like a speeding projectile, its beam darting before it. Then Dorrek's ray caught it and clung. From the deck of the Cube the shuddering Grenfell saw the bodies of the thirty girls wither and fall. For an instant the insulated platform held together. It was barely a hundred feet from the barrage base. Its ray spluttered and vanished. The platform tilted, and crashed to the rocks, the black figures of its men little falling dots against the barrage light.

A group of girls made a similar attack. From the darkness of the valley floor they hurled themselves at an opening between the barrage projectors.

Flying in a group, they skimmed the

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surface. They safely passed the barrage line, rose inside over the enemy camp. For a minute perhaps they dropped their bombs. The flares were visible to Grenfell through the curtain. How many of Dorrek's men and insects were killed was never known.

The beams from the hand weapons of the girls were flashing down. They flew holding their shields to protect their bodies and wings as well as they could. And mounting, crossed perhaps a third of the camp, leaving a trail of destruction beneath them. But one by one the enemy rays caught them; brought them down.

A minute or two and the last of the girls, high over the center of the camp and struggling to fly out, was touched by the barrage. Her body fell a tiny wisp of flame, gone before it reached the ground.

That was enough for Grenfell. Three hundred of the girls were still in the cliff camp near the Cube. He ordered them to keep out of the air, and sent two of the emergency platforms to fly to the lower camp and order the four hundred girls, the projectors and flying platforms there to come up here and join him. Dorrek's activities were at this upper end, and if he tried to escape through the lower cañon he would encounter Arton's army.

Grenfell sought Tama, but she was missing. Nor could he locate Jimmy Turk, Guy, Toh, nor Roc.

The storm was increasing in fury. Grenfell moved the Cube forward and began firing directly down. But the shots were always intercepted. The Cube was unwieldy when flying for short distances close to the ground. But twice Grenfell manipulated it around the valley; and once it fired down from four miles overhead.

He wanted to hit the base projectors, but he could not. One or two of the shots entered the camp. This he did not altogether want. It was a horrible handicap, for Grenfell did not want a shot of his to strike the Mercutian ball in which Rowena and I were imprisoned.

NOW the Cube was again back on the cliff. Dorrek had begun moving his barrage line forward, his first offensive tactic. The barrage came within half a mile of the cliff, its lengthening line strengthened by other projectors. Their range carried them now to the cliff top. Their rays began raking it. Grenfell's projector at the cañon mouth was driven back.

Rain was presently falling. The crazy wind had steadied. The red lightning flares and thunder cracks were almost continuous. Dorrek's mounting bombs fell upon the cliff. The wind brought the gas fumes. Grenfell closed up the Cube, firing down into the turmoil through its deck port.

He ordered the girls farther back and a hundred of them into the air to dissipate the fumes with neutralizing bombs.

It was then, with Tama and Guy missing, that events got beyond Grenfell's control. Dorrek's barrage advanced again until it reached the base of the cliff. From such a position the enemy projector could not rake over the top of the cliff. Grenfell thought Dorrek's move was to command the cañon—to enable his men to escape back toward the Cold Country. He planned to let them go; the deep, narrow gorge was twenty miles long in this direction; the escaping men and brues could easily be assailed later. Grenfell was watching the silver ball

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where it still lay in the center of the valley. He was convinced that Dorrek and all his leaders were aboard it; if it should ascend to get away, the Cube was ready for the chase.

But the enemy did not escape. Brues began crawling up the perpendicular cliff in the segment which the barrage now commanded. A hundred of the giant insects were on top of the cliff before Grenfell was aware of it. And to each of them three or four men had clung. They spread out over the upper plateau.

Lurking men among the rocks, dark slithering insects—spreading out, advancing upon Grenfell's camp. The fume bombs and rockets stopped coming. But the insects with their human burden mounted the cliff wall steadily.

Grenfell ordered his girls and platforms into the air. They flew low, seeking out the crawling enemy. A hundred individual conflicts. The upper plateau in all that vicinity was dotted with the tiny lights of the girls, flashing down upon the gruesome insects. Brief combats—always with the brue left writhing in death agony.

Dorrek's men were harder to find. Once upon the cliff top they had ordered the insects forward, left them, and vanished. Presently no more came up. The move puzzled Grenfell.

THEN abruptly they attacked the Cube! Grenfell was standing with his men on D-Face deck. The lower door was open. There was a flurry of girls flying near by. A sharp conflict; and Grenfell saw in a red lightning puff fifty or more furred figures of men running forward among the crags near at hand. With short hand rays darting before them, they rushed at the Cube's doorway.

A suicidal attempt. The infuriated, reckless girls hurled themselves down like frenzied birds. Doubtless none of the men would have lived to reach the doorway. But it startled Grenfell, as Dorrek probably intended. The Cube hastily rose; and as it lifted, a projector, of longer range than any of Dorrek's others, shot at it from the barrage line.

The beam caught the mounting Cube. There was a horrible moment when Grenfell thought that the hull plates would melt. The interior heated, stifling; choking fumes of fusing metal; a rain of smoke and fire and snapping, sizzling sparks outside.

Then it was over. The Cube's hull, protected to resist the cold of Interplanetary Space and the friction heat of atmospheric passage, withstood the brief, intense blast. The Cube rose beyond range; came again into the lurid, storm-filled night.

Grenfell had flung on all power. He checked it now. Baker, Gibbons and the others—and the Hill City officials who were here—gathered in a startled, frightened group on the deck. The Cube seemed not greatly harmed, but it had been a close call.

From a height of some twenty thousand feet Grenfell gazed down and saw that all the girls had flung themselves into the conflict! Darting at the barrage in a score of places; a large group of them in the air close above it; hovering; dropping down into it like plummets. Other groups skimming the valley floor—plunging at the base projectors. Others, living from a height with spread, motionless wings.

Two platforms with men and bombs came from the plateau in a long dive toward a triangular opening between the projectors. Both got through, into the camp, raking it for an instant before they fell in little bursts of flame.

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Those horrible little bursts of flame! They were everywhere. Tiny puffs. Each of them a human life gone. And the barrage line held.

A minute of this. To Grenfell, cold with horror, it was an eternity, yet he had no more than time to order Rance to lower the Cube. A minute. Another minute—or five at the most—those reckless frenzied girls would all have sacrificed themselves.

Grenfell stood breathless. And suddenly he saw a distant segment of the barrage go down. A single projector went dark, leaving a great hole above it. But why? The girls had not done it; there had been no attack there.

Abruptly the dark projector flashed on again. Grenfell gasped at a sight incredible.

WHEN she could find no trace of Jimmy, Rowena was alarmed.

"He's gone! Jack, Jimmy Turk has gone!"

"But he was with us a moment ago. Rowena, he—"

I leaped to my feet, standing in the bottom of the little hollow within the enemy camp, with the battle raging around us. Then I saw him; crawling on the ground a hundred feet away, his broken leg dragging after him. In three or four leaps I was with him.

"What are you doing?" I flung myself down with him. "What in—"

"Let me alone! Lie near the ground. You'll be safe in that hollow."

He tried to pull away from me; but when I held him he told me his plan. Possible, at least.

"Look, Jack, we're near it. Only three men there. We can end this war at once."

The area here was comparatively quiet.

"Look, Jack—how close—"

I had not realized how near we were to one of the barrage projectors. Jimmy had crawled to a little rise of ground. A head, not over a hundred feet from us, the projector stood on the rocks with its vertical spreading beam above it. A three-foot metallic cone, mounted on a low wheeled carriage. Three men stood on the small low platform; their figures showed dark against the radiance. There was momentarily nothing between us and those men. And their attention was outward, not back toward us, behind them in the camp.

It was black here save for the lightning flares. I bounded back to Rowena. She flattened herself down in the hollow against the rocks, as I directed, but turned her white face up to me. A lightning flash painted it with a flush of red.

I was again with Jimmy. The men at the projector still had not seen us. A hundred feet to go . . .

"I'll carry you," I whispered, "until we get within range."

"No! Might see us. Takes a little longer, but I can make good speed."

He had gone forward a short distance while I was with Rowena. In a lull of all the screaming sounds of the turmoil, we could hear the steady hum and hiss of this projector as we got closer to it.

"Jack, I'll give the word and we'll fire together."

Our hand cylinders had a short range; we did not know how far, but certainly twenty feet. We got almost that close, still undiscovered. I was aware of an increased turmoil outside the barrage. But not at this particular segment.

The men on the projector platform turned to look back across the camp. But their gaze was in the air toward

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the rising Cube, with the high-powered ray leaping up and striking it.

We crawled a little farther. Lay a moment, our black forms motionless against the black rocks. One of the men was looking our way. Then his attention seemed diverted. We went on again. We were doubtless plainly visible now.

A rush for it: Jimmy went like a maimed crab on his hands and one leg.

"Jack—now!"

OUR little blue-green beams flashed. Two of the men went down. The other leaped over the platform edge. His shot went wide of us. He vanished. I ran for the projector, with Jimmy scuttling after me. From behind the platform the figure appeared. My shot exploded his weapon, but his insulated suit withstood it. My leap carried me into him. We fell, rolled under the platform. He was a man thickset, but frail. He lay inert under my blows.

I rose from under the projector carriage. Jimmy had reached it, pulled himself to the platform; fumbled with the mechanism. By chance he turned it off. He was cursing, panting as I jumped up beside him.

"Blamed thing—can't—" He pushed me away. Tilted the projector down. "Got it! Now, Jack!"

He flashed on the giant beam. Horizontal now. Not outward—inward!

A single slow, sidewise oscillation, sweeping in one brief instant the full width of the camp with a swath of destruction and death! For an instant—the gruesome sizzle and crackle of withering, blasting heat. The whole barrage, as the central controlling mechanism must have been struck, went black. Jimmy's beam vanished with it. Darkness everywhere.

There were the lightning flares overhead; the small darting rays of the attacking girls; a few falling bombs. Then the mounting yellow flames of the burning camp, the wrecked, half-fused silver ball lying broken in its center; and over the chaos the darting shapes of the flying girls with harmless little search-beams now to see what might be left alive.

WE found Rowena safe in the little gully over which the blast had swept. Tama and Guy returned with the bodies of Toh and Roc on their flying platform, only in time to see the strangely abrupt, terrible end to the conflict.

It was hours before the storm had passed and we were ready to return to the Hill City. A few prisoners were taken, not many. They found Dorrek's body lying in the wreckage of his vehicle. And Muta's body, her arms clasped about his neck.

With the wounded crowding the Cube, we started back. The return of the victorious army! There is no greater misnomer than to call any returning army victorious. The Cube was jammed with a gruesome burden. The maimed; the living who, most of them, would rather have died. The platforms were heavy with wingless girls. Every cart in Arton's army was laden for the return; the young men tenderly carried stretchers.

Tama and Guy were married in the Hill City. New laws were proposed regarding the clipping and mutilation of the virgins' wings. They had saved their nation, these fearless, reckless—once rebellious—virgins. Put aside their grievance against the men for the greater cause.

There was as yet no enacted law to say that Tama could be married with

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wings unclipped, yet she was. And every man who saw the strange little ceremony raised his voice to cheer. Jimmy stood there beside them. And Tama turned and kissed him in Earth fashion before them all.

Rowena, Jimmy and I are back on Earth now. Guy and Tama came with us for a brief visit. As Grenfell foresaw, a new era is at hand: the era of Interplanetary travel. New worlds, but not to conquer.

A few moments ago Rowena, Jimmy and I witnessed what to us at least was the most emotion-stirring sight of our lives. The first broadcasted televised scene of Tama flying. It was why she made this second visit to the Earth; to show herself—to cement the friendship of the two worlds.

Here in my study we gathered before our little mirror-grid. It showed the narrow vista of a woodland scene. From over the distant green trees, with the fleecy sky behind her, Tama came flying. Waving black hair and blue-white draperies; white limbs poised; vivid crimson wings outstretched. Guy was standing in the foreground. She came soaring, passed over him; wheeled like a graceful bird; landed upon tip-toe with back-flapping wings. Stood smiling, bowing and kissing her hands to her vast unseen audience. And then turning, ran and flung herself into Guy's waiting arms.

THE END.

East Indian Tartans

NOT only do the Scotch display distinctive tribal or family tartans, but certain East Indian and other tribes do so as well. Among the Tawi-Tawis, the Sulus, and in Mindanao these tartans woven from cotton and colored with native dyes are striking, but the genuine articles are hard to secure even in great markets such as Zamboanga and Jolo. An American recently returning from Zamboanga brought with him several bolts of cotton goods bearing tribal designs. He thought them authentic hand work until they were inspected by an expert in the United States.

"This stuff is the product of British cotton mills either in England or Singapore," declared the expert, "though the imitation is excellent."

In the northern provinces of Luzon, many Christian natives find employment in weaving cotton G-strings for the pagan mountaineers. The work is all done on hand looms, the dyes being of Chinese origin, usually indigo. Pagan fancy runs to crosses, rising suns, and triangles. G-strings are usually two yards in length and a foot in width. The mountaineer refuses to wear trousers when among his native hills, but is forced to do so when visiting lowland towns. In the back country regions of Panay, the pagan Montescos hide trousers in the jungle, and don them on going to market. Business over, the G-string resumes its former job.

Now comes the news that the Philippines are to have modern cotton mills. Don Vicente Madrigal, a multi-millionaire, is soon to erect a chain of such mills thus doing away with hand machines. The development of the cotton mills means the vanishing of much that is interesting and picturesque.

Charles Adams.

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He was passing through a tangle of grass when it happened

Steal a Dog's Bone

Rain, isolation, and discomfort were not the only things that made their Borneo jungle post troublesome to Werner and McHenry—for each had good reason to suspect the other of treachery

By HUGH B. CAVE

"YOU and yer blasted magazines! Read, read, read! Don't you ever do nothin' but *read?*" And Martin Werner jerked out of his chair with a rasping, half-smothered oath and flung open the shanty door.

It was already dark outside. The clearing extended feebly into a wall of jungle, rimmed with formidable banyans. At one end of it huddled the huts of the Dyak laborers — beetle-shaped bamboo and nipa structures propped up on grotesque stilts. At the other end squatted the shacks of the two white men—two wooden hovels topped with corrugated iron roofs.

For eleven months Werner had been in charge of this deep-jungle *kampong,* rafting shipments of teak and ebony down river to a North Borneo lumber company. A lonely existence, little short of living burial. Then McHenry had come. McHenry—six foot six, long-faced, indifferent, lazy as a tree viper. And the two men had nothing in common at all.

From the very first, McHenry had made a habit of drifting into the other man's shanty at night and flopping into the big chair with his long-boned legs sprawled over the table. There he buried himself for hours on end in one

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of his eternal magazines. McHenry and his magazines were as inseparable as the head and tail of a krait.

Werner closed the door again and stared at the man sullenly. Finally he sat down and played through a hand of solitaire.

"Say, you!" he said suddenly, glancing casually across the table. "When you signed up to come here, did they tell you what happened to the two guys who were here before you?"

"I didn't ask 'em," McHenry shrugged, without looking up from his story.

"No? Well, maybe you'll wish you had!"

McHenry wasn't interested. Werner leaned closer, took time to light a deliberate cigarette, and said with assumed carelessness:

"His name was Moran, the first one. The other was Kennedy. They were murdered—both of 'em."

McHenry's magazine dropped slowly.

"W'at?"

"Murdered."

"Yeah? Who done it?"

"I ain't sure. Maybe the natives; maybe not."

"And—w'at for?"

"We do a little side business up here," Werner said quietly. "Tradin'—with the natives of the jungle villages. Dyaks and Punans and Muruts. This is diamond territory hereabouts, and once in a while some native stumbles on blue ground. They bring the stones here to me, and I buy 'em cheap. Then I got to send 'em down river. See?"

McHenry grunted.

"This feller Moran—and Kennedy—they were takin' diamonds down river," Werner shrugged. "We found Moran three days after he left here. The dugout drifted down to a Dyak village about six miles below, and the Dyaks brought Moran back. Not nice to look at, after three days with the flies and leeches. His head was half chopped off. Ever see a Dyak *parang?*"

"Yeah, once."

"Pretty thing, hey? Twelve inches of blade. Good butcher knife."

"W'at happened to Kennedy?"

"Never found him."

McHenry reached for a cigarette and picked up his magazine again. Werner stared at him suspiciously. Werner had been thinking peculiar things about McHenry. The big fellow's indifference was unnatural. It looked like a blind, to cover something. Maybe McHenry already knew the details of the story. Maybe he had killed Moran and Kennedy himself.

"You heard it before somewhere?" he demanded.

"No. It's news," McHenry grunted, and went on reading.

Werner's face gathered into a knot. It was damned funny that this fellow should reveal no emotion about the mysterious deaths of two white men. Any ordinary man, learning the fate of his predecessors, would have been at least halfway fearful. At least eager for details. But McHenry—not batting an eye. Just sitting here, reading his blasted magazines!

McHenry closed his magazine and lowered his feet to the floor.

"Good yarn," he grinned, tossing the book on the table. "You oughta read it, Werner."

His angular frame lounged out of the doorway and slouched across the blackened clearing. Werner walked to the threshold and stood there, watching him. On the other side of the *kampong* a fire smoldered in the center

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of the Dyak village; beyond that the jungle was a wall of darkness.

IT rained the next day. Not heavily, not violently, but with the persistent drumming characteristic of Borneo's wet season. By noon the floor of the *kampong* was a bloated layer of black slop and the surrounding jungle had become a thick gray wall of mist. An hour after noon McHenry slopped to Werner's hut. Stooping, because the doorway was built too low for his rangy frame, he slumped over the damp floor to the big chair.

Werner, sprawled in the only other chair, looked up and growled irritably: "Stinkin' weather. Listen to it poundin' on the roof. All mornin' long the same dashed thing."

McHenry picked up a magazine, opened it, and began to read.

"Rain, rain, rain!" Werner kept up. "Week in and week out. This blasted country ain't fit for lepers!"

McHenry went on reading. Werner glared at him, muttered something unintelligible, and kept still. He was still sitting motionless, still frowning, when the door opened. One of the village Dyaks scuffed over the sill and came forward.

"Tuan—"

"Well, what is it?" Werner snapped.

"Some men have come, Tuan, from Terekua's village, with more diamonds."

"Diamonds, Kemali? You hear that, McHenry?"

"Yeah, I heard it." McHenry's reply was sluggishly indifferent. The magazine was commanding all his attention.

Werner shot a quick, imperious glance at him. Then, sliding into a rubber coat, he nodded to Kemali and went out. Kemali trailed after him.

Half an hour later, when he came back, McHenry was still deep in the story.

"I got 'em," Werner said, pushing the door shut. "Got 'em cheap, too. Have a look."

He reached out and dropped a dozen bits of black rock on top of McHenry's magazine. McHenry picked one up, examined it casually, and put it down again.

"Ain't much to look at."

"No? Expect to find 'em all polished and price-tagged?"

"I wouldn't murder a guy for those things," McHenry shrugged.

"You wouldn't, eh?"

McHenry didn't catch the inflection; or if he did, he failed to make a retort. But the inflection was there—a significant, suspicious double meaning, packed with subtlety. Werner scooped up the stones and went into the back room. In a little while McHenry stuffed the magazine into his shirt front and wallowed back to his own hut.

THE rain continued. Hour after hour it seeped through the thatched roofs of the Dyak huts and rattled down on the corrugated iron coverings of the two wooden shanties. Darkness crept over the *kampong*.

McHenry lay on the bunk in his shack. Above him, on a crude shelf, the oil lamp threw a sickly ocher glare over his magazine. Midnight came and went before he stirred from that position.

Then, stretching himself erect, he pulled on his boots and went to the door.

Still raining. Still hammering down with infernal relentlessness, and not a sign of a let-up. But the next installment of McHenry's story lay

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across the clearing on the table of Werner's unlighted hut; and McHenry took his reading seriously.

Slipping into a yellow oilskin, McHenry stepped out. His boots sucked in and out of the mud as he stumbled through the dark. He found Werner's hut and opened the door quietly.

No sense in making a lot of unnecessary noise. Rouse a man at this hour, with the rain tattooing on a tin roof above his head, and he didn't get to sleep without a lot of cursing and growling. Especially a man like Werner.

McHenry paced noiselessly over the floor to the table and reached out to gather up the scattered magazines that lay there. Then, very suddenly, he stiffened.

There was no light in the back room —no thread of illumination creeping under the door. Yet Werner's voice, guarded and almost a whisper, was emanating from that very room and talking significant words!

"Whoever it was killed Moran and Kennedy will be on the lookout for you. You got to be careful!"

The voice that answered was the deep, throaty guttural of Kemali..

"Yes, Tuan. I will be."

"It's a long trek down river. A whole lot can happen. If these stones are lost like the others, there'll be the devil to pay. Do you know why I told you to come here to-night?"

"No, Tuan. I wondered."

"I'm suspicious of some one around here, see? There's a man in this *kampong* I don't trust. Not a word out of you, now. You leave here to-morrow night in secret."

"Yes, Tuan."

"I don't want any loose talking, even with your own Dyaks. That's all."

Something moved in the other room. Footsteps approached the closed door that McHenry was so intently staring at. Frowning, McHenry scooped up his magazines and fell back.

He was too late. The inner door opened before he reached the threshold. The small, knotted figure in the doorway became suddenly tense. No exclamation came from Werner's lips. No sound at all penetrated the sudden silence of the shanty, except the incessant drumming on the roof and the sharp intake of Werner's breath.

"All right, Kemali," Werner said. "Clear out."

He moved aside to let the Dyak pass. Kemali walked stiffly out, glancing curiously at McHenry. Then, deliberate as a hangman, Werner stepped to the table, lighted the lamp, and sat down, staring straight into McHenry's impassive face.

"You heard what I said to Kemali?"

"Yeah. I come 'ere to get a book. Thought you'd be asleep."

Werner got out of his chair.

"How much did you hear, McHenry?"

"Nothin' much. None o' my business, I reckon."

"And you came here for a book!"

"Yeah. This one here." McHenry held it up. "Readin' a continued story, and this here's the end of it. It got me guessin'."

"You're not the only one that's guessin'."

"No?"

"Better go back to your shack and keep on with your readin', McHenry. Next time you come here"—Werner's hands clenched savagely, bitterly—"don't be so damned considerate about wakin' me up!"

McHenry shambled slowly to the

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door. For a moment he turned to stare directly into Werner's twisted face; and the stare was not pleasant.

"Yeah," McHenry drawled. "Next time I come sneakin' in here, I'll bring a brass band and blow on a bugle."

THE rain continued monotonously. Alone in his shanty, Werner paced back and forth across the floor, scowling thickly.

Five minutes later he stumbled out into the rain and slopped across the *kampong* toward McHenry's shack, where a light was visible in the murk.

Never once did he look up, but walked with head down and hands thrust into his pockets. Had he lifted his head, he might have noticed that the thatch door-covering of one of the Dyak huts was slightly drawn aside. He might have paid attention to the brace of narrowed eyes glued to the opening, watching him. They were Dyak eyes.

And they were keen eyes. All Dyak eyes are keen, unless the eyelids are inhabited by tiny crawling insects. No doubt of it, these eyes saw Werner's slouching, stoop-shouldered figure pass in front of the illuminated window of McHenry's hut, just a moment before Werner opened the door and stepped inside.

Unaware of them, Werner shook the water from his gleaming coat. McHenry, lying on the bunk beneath the lamp, looked up curiously.

Werner flung off his coat and sat down.

"I been thinkin', McHenry."

"Thinkin' won't dry the mud up."

Werner took the magazine out of the big man's hands. He wanted McHenry to listen, and listen attentively.

"I got it all figured out."

"About w'at?"

"How to get the stones down river without losin' 'em."

McHenry said nothing. He waited for the rest of it.

"I've fixed it with Kemali," Werner said quietly, "to take the stones down river to-morrow night. But there ain't much chance of the diamonds reachin' Sandakan, or Kemali comin' back alive. It's bound to get out."

"Yeah? How?"

"The niggers talk."

"Well, w'at about it?"

Werner reached inside his shirt and brought out a flat metal box, the size of a cigarette case.

"Here's the stones," he said deliberately. "I want you to take 'em down river to-night—now."

"To-night?" McHenry inspected the box casually. "Locked, eh?"

"For safety, that's all. Here's the key." Werner dropped a tiny steel key into the big man's hand. "No one will know about this. To-morrow night Kemali 'll go down just as I've arranged. He'll take a handful of common rocks—but he won't know it."

McHenry glanced up at the roof, where the rain was pounding.

"You think of these things at a rotten time," he growled.

"Sorry. It's got to be done."

"I was right in the middle of a story, Werner. Now if you could wait—"

"It's to-night, or not at all," Werner scowled. "Take the magazine with you. You'll have to paddle the dugout yourself until you reach the first down-river village. Then you can get natives to do the dirty work, and you'll have plenty of time to lie around and read."

McHenry stretched himself, swung his legs to the floor, and sat up. For a while he studied the small man's eyes, attempting to read the thoughts

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behind them. Then, satisfied, he groped to his feet. The metal case containing the diamonds he stuffed into his shirt. The key went into his belt pocket. Finally, pulling a slouch hat over his hair, he threw on a rubber coat and moved to the door.

Werner's fingers gripped his arm.

"Go out the back way. The dugouts are at the landing."

McHenry remembered something, walked to the bunk, and picked up the magazine he had been reading. He sifted the pages carefully and tore out the particular story he was interested in.

"I wish to God," he shrugged, folding the pages and wadding them inside his coat, "you'd thought of this scheme next week some time. This is a blamed good story. About two guys in the British Foreign Service, fightin' Malay pirates. One guy—his name is Roberson—is in love with a girl, and—"

"I know," Werner clipped. "Beat it, will you? And for God's sake don't lose those stones. If you do—"

McHenry opened the rear door and shuffled out into the darkness. Wallowing through the mud toward the invisible wharf on the river shore, he pulled the brim of his hat down and cursed. It was a lousy night.

NONE of the prospects were pleasing. McHenry's face lengthened as he considered them. At best, a native dugout is the clumsiest craft afloat. On a night like this the rain would make a veritable slop barrel out of it, filling it with slime and causing it to limp from side to side like a lame crocodile.

The river, too, up at this end, was shallow, filled with concealed roots. Plenty of crocs, and half a dozen varieties of sociable water snakes. The jungle on both sides of the stream would be black as the inside of a water main, and just as sweet-smelling now that twenty hours of rain had sucked all the fumes of rotten vegetation out of the ground. Yeah—nice trip!

He might have found something else to worry about, had he turned to watch the *kampong* behind him as he bent over and untied one of the dugouts. But he didn't, and he didn't see the trio of shapes that slid across the clearing. They came from the Dyak village and disappeared into the steaming jungle, along the river trail.

McHenry's dugout nosed into the river and proceeded slowly downstream.

For half an hour he kept on. The narrow stream twisted and turned through the jungle with the eccentricities of a broken snake. No let-up in the drizzle. No relief. The rain seeped under McHenry's coat and got down his skin, taking hold of the muscles and leaving a chill ache in every square inch. Leeches got into the boat somehow. He had to stop regularly to scrape the bloated, gray-colored slugs off his arms and legs. More than once his paddle struck down on solid shapes, and the things responded with a sudden swirl that rocked the boat. Crocs.

It was lucky, he thought, that he'd brought the magazine story along. Later on, when he got to the first Dyak village, he could take things easy. He wondered how the yarn was going to end. Mentally he cursed Werner for kicking him out of a comfortable hut before he'd had a chance to reach the solution.

It wasn't comforting to turn around and peer into the jungle. Actually, the jungle was nothing more than a black

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pit on either side, and he could see nothing in detail. But it was the knowledge of the infernal maze that extended beyond that wall that made McHenry keep his eyes straight ahead.

The dugout moved with maddening sluggishness. It wasn't safe to push the clumsy thing any faster; but at this rate, if anything smashed out of the jungle and slithered over the deck, there would be no defense. Oddly enough, his imagination didn't conjure up tangible things. Not jungle cats or hostile natives or even the dreaded banded coils of the king cobras and kraits that lurked in this infernal graveyard. No, the shapes he anticipated were intangible ones.

He was wrong about that. They were tangible enough when they came!

BUT they didn't come until the dugout had penetrated more than a mile into the grove. They didn't come while McHenry was alert and watchful. They waited until the incessant back-and-forth rhythm of the paddle and the monotonous lapping of the water and the swishing of grass and reeds had dulled his senses.

Then it happened. Just as the dugout passed through a sinister clump of citronella grass, figures sprang up. An iron hand drove a blade through the drizzling rain at the occupant of the lurching dugout.

The thing found its mark. McHenry groaned once, lifted a weak, semi-paralyzed hand to clutch at the hilt of the *parang* buried in his shoulder, and then pitched sidewise into the bottom of the dugout. The paddle ran through his fingers and slid into the water.

The dugout lurched suddenly as naked feet leaped to the deck. A massive figure bent over McHenry's inert body. Powerful fingers seized the hilt of the *parang* and wrenched the blade out.

Not a sound came from McHenry's lips. Dyak hands gripped his sprawled body and jerked it over, and then fumbled through his pockets. Cigarettes, a pipe, a flat metal case with a key, a wad of printed magazine pages—they all came out.

McHenry's eyes opened cautiously. They focused slowly. They saw the Dyak stand erect and growl something to two others of the same breed who crouched in the reeds, holding the dugout in position. Next instant the dugout lurched abruptly; and a moment later, in the dark and drizzle of the jungle, McHenry lay alone.

He remained there for a full fifteen minutes. His shoulder was bleeding a lot, staining the black water crimson in the bottom of the boat. With his good arm he managed to tear his trouser leg and improvise a clumsy bandage. After that he lay quiet for another long interval. When he felt better he struggled to a kneeling position.

Mechanically he fumbled in his pockets. The diamonds were gone, all right. Case and key and all. The cigarettes were gone, too, and the magazine pages he had ripped out, back in his shanty, more than an hour ago. The devils had thought, probably, that those printed pages might be a letter of some sort—incriminating evidence.

McHenry got to his feet. He was too weak to paddle the dugout back up river. Anyway, the paddle was gone. Careful of his shoulder, he climbed out of the dugout and pushed through the reeds that lined the bank. It was black as a monk's hood here, and the ground was a soggy, spongy carpet of dead vegetation.

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He found the river trail—the only opening in the maze. Plodding with weary steps, he followed it along the river shore. There was no hurry, he mused. He knew where to find the man he was looking for.

IT took him two hours to reach the *kampong*. When he arrived, the clearing was precisely as he had left it. Not a light showing.

He slopped straight toward the most formidable of the bug-shaped Dyak huts. The notched tree trunk which provided access to the doorway had been drawn up to keep out the snakes and leeches. But one end of it protruded under the reed mat that hung over the entrance. Reaching up, McHenry jerked the thing down abruptly and hurled himself up it.

For a moment nothing happened. The surprise of his appearance was too sudden. The man he had come for was sitting in the darkness against the opposite wall, fiddling with a flat metal case and a key. The key didn't seem to fit the lock.

After that there was nothing slow about the proceedings. The Dyak lurched up, stood quivering for an instant, and smashed forward.

The man was Kemali.

Kemali was a jungle Dyak. Jungle Dyaks wear only a single article of clothing and a single weapon—a drab-colored, flabby *sarong* that fits like a burlap sack; and a *parang* butcher knife that hangs in the folds of it. One to keep him warm; the other to keep him alive.

Kemali's hand lashed down with uncanny speed and accuracy and whipped out that murderous blade.

But McHenry had other plans. He stepped aside. The blade hacked into the *nipa* wall behind him, embedding itself. McHenry's good arm, terminating in a mallet fist, made sudden savage contact with the face.

The *parang* remained in the wall, stuck there. Kemali released it with clutching, groping fingers and staggered back to crash into the opposite barrier. He stood there, flattened like a bat, lips curled, eyes dilated. And when he came forward again he came more thoughtfully, more cunningly, with a great deal more wisdom. He came with both hands outthrust before him, fingers curled.

McHenry chose not to wait for him. Very abruptly McHenry moved two steps forward and twisted one thick arm about the Dyak's middle.

A long time ago McHenry had earned a middling livelihood pinning other men's shoulders to the mat.

The Dyak was heavy—quite as heavy as McHenry. He had no battered shoulder to hinder him. Thirty years of jungle breeding had taught him tricks of another trade. Savage tricks. His naked foot shot between McHenry's legs. His elbow doubled into a point and ground into McHenry's abdomen.

McHenry fell over backward, with the Dyak reaching for his mouth. But the falling movement did not stop with the crash of McHenry's body. McHenry doubled into a sudden tense knot and went flat again. A pair of solid, crushing knees entwined about Kemali's throat.

After that it was too quick to follow. A snapping movement of McHenry's legs hurled the Dyak across the floor. Kemali stumbled up, gasping. He reached for the knife in the wall. He leaped forward into a pile-driver fist that belched with sickening force into his sweating face.

Plummet fashion, Kemali hurtled

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through the doorway. Like a flopping, crippled bat he sprawled through space and fell into the slime outside.

McHENRY pulled in a deep breath. He went to the doorway and looked down, with casual interest. The Dyak lay below him, a bloated thing embedded face down in the mud. Another figure, a hundred yards distant, was running forward across the clearing.

McHenry turned, fumbled in his pockets for a match, and found a wad of watersoaked magazine pages. He picked them up and picked up, also, the flat metal case which Kemali had cast aside. Then he turned around to confront the white man who was clambering over the door sill.

And they stood there, both of them, looking at each other in silence. Werner stared blankly, in amazement. McHenry, towering almost to the roof of the hut, returned the stare with a quiet, indifferent grin.

"What happened?" Werner blurted.

"That guy," McHenry pointed to the sprawled thing in the mud outside, "threw a knife in me about two miles down river. Then he removed the tin case and the rest of my belongin's. I just come here to get 'em back."

Werner came forward, gripping McHenry's arm — a movement that brought a wry twist to McHenry's mouth.

"You're—hurt?"

"Yeah. If you got a bandage—"

Werner became efficient again. Pulling McHenry to the door, he helped him down. Together, with Werner's arm around McHenry's shoulder, they slopped through the rain and muck to the little man's hut.

There, ten minutes later, Werner finished dressing McHenry's wound, while McHenry lounged back in the big chair, sucking on a cigarette.

"What a thick-headed fool I been, Mac," Werner said.

"Yeah? Why?"

"I had it all figured out that you were the guy murdered Moran and Kennedy. I sent you down river just to get you out of the way. The stones you were carryin' were nothin' but rocks."

"Yeah," McHenry said.

"I thought it was a slick idea, too, givin' you the key. I figured you'd try to open the case; then you'd find the key didn't fit and you'd think I give you the wrong key by mistake. Thought you'd keep right on goin', and wait until you got to Sandakan before you broke the case open. That would 've given me time to get Kemali down with the real stones."

"Yeah, I guessed all that."

"You—*what?* You— Say, you big, overgrown elephant! You mean you knew all along—"

"Yeah. I may be dumb, feller, but I ain't that dumb. The only reason I took the job was to get away."

Werner leaned forward, frowning.

"If you knew the stones weren't in the case," he blurted, "then why did you follow that damned Dyak back here and fight with him for it?"

"He stuck a knife in me, mister. Him and two others. That reminds me, we gotta settle with the other two in the mornin'. I don't like guys throwin' knives in me. It ain't right. It ain't civilized. And, besides—"

McHenry reached into his coat and fetched out the watersoaked pages of the magazine.

"He took this, too. Gosh, guy—I hadn't finished with it yet."

THE END.

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The reporter jerked the flimsy curtain loose

The Grapevine Murders

Fighting a powerful gang of corrupt politicians who seek the death penalty for his girl client on a double murder charge, Gillian Hazeltine, brilliant criminal lawyer, was soon to learn the full measure of his enemies' malicious power

By GEORGE F. WORTS

Author of "The Diamond Bullet," "Murder on the High Seas," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

ON the night that wealthy old Florence Linn was murdered with a piece of grapevine in the yard of her home at Monroe, Gillian Hazeltine, brilliant criminal lawyer from Greenfield, was at the Linn home, trying to secure justice for Joyce Linn, niece of the murdered woman. Florence Linn, prompted by a gang of unscrupulous politicians, had been trying

This story began in the Argosy for June 20.

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to force Joyce to violate the conditions of her eccentric grandfather's will, which left Joyce two and a half million dollars, provided she lived with her aunt, was not convicted of a crime, and was not voluntarily absent from the house for longer than twenty-four consecutive hours.

Alex Runyan, domineering and unscrupulous county attorney, heads the gang and is backed up by Doc Patch, sheriff, and Dave Wolfe, county judge. The night-riding Green Masks enforce Runyan's commands.

When the body of Florence Linn is found strangled alongside her vicious mongrel, Runyan arrests Joyce, although Ned Linn, disreputable nephew of Florence, Jake Ritter, gardener, and Steve Carne, colored house man are under suspicion, as is Michael Denny, Joyce's artist sweetheart, who is discovered at the scene, bloody and battered. He explains that he had been kidnaped and beaten by the Green Masks, and was seeking Joyce. Ned Linn, who was rounded up with Florence's diamond necklace in his possession, claims that he took it after she was killed.

Cynera Dell, who lives next door, stops playing her organ and joins the group. Shortly afterward, Judge Fillow, a hanger-on, is also found strangled by a piece of grapevine. Gillian discovers a similar piece of vine in Jake Ritter's room, but the latter claims he uses it as a whip.

Gillian is overpowered by the sheriff and Ritter and is taken to a cabin in a near-by swamp, but is rescued by Silky Davis, gangster friend of the lawyer's. Ritter escapes.

Gillian learns from Cynera, Joyce's quaint but shrewd old friend, that Cynera had retrieved ten thousand dollars of Joyce's money that Judge Fillow had misappropriated, and that she intended to give the money to Joyce. It was necessary to blackmail the judge, however, and Sheriff Patch had overheard. Although Cynera tells Gillian she believes Patch to be the murderer, she would be reluctant to testify against him.

As Joyce's trial approaches, Gillian finds that Ned Linn and Carne, who are being held at witnesses, have been schooled to aid the prosecution.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CYNERA DISAPPEARS.

AS soon as he had finished dinner, Gillian retired to his study with the intention of devoting the evening to a consideration of the evidence at his disposal and to the plans with which he would combat Alex Runyan's attack.

He read every scrap which any of the evening papers printed concerning the crime. The story of his kidnaping was sensationally displayed; with it was printed Runyan's quite as sensational denial and explanation.

"I know absolutely nothing of Gillian Hazeltine's alleged kidnaping. In fact, I am extremely skeptical of his assertions. Gillian Hazeltine has stooped to trickery before this to divert public attention to himself."

Commenting on the murder, Runyan said, in another article:

"I am utterly convinced that Joyce Linn is guilty of these murders. The public must realize that I bring these charges against so young and beautiful a woman only after mature thought. Her youth and beauty have no bearing on the legal aspects of the crime. A life must pay for a life, whether young and beautiful, or old and ugly."

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Finishing with the newspapers, Gillian devoted himself to a thorough study of Abner Linn's will. These paragraphs especially interested him:

"However, if Joyce Linn's absence for more than twenty-four consecutive hours from Florence Linn's abode is caused by the former's arrest and imprisonment on a criminal charge of which she is found guilty, she will forfeit her rights in the aforementioned bequest of two and one-half million dollars.

"In the event of my granddaughter, Joyce Linn, forfeiting her rights in the aforementioned bequest in the above-mentioned manner, then this said bequest shall be paid outright into the hand of my daughter Florence Linn.

"In the event that either Florence Linn or Joyce Linn shall die of suspicious causes, and it is legally proved that the survivor was instrumental in bringing the death to pass, then, no matter what defense she may declare in court, the survivor shall forfeit her rights to any portion of my estate, and all of my estate shall pass on to such heirs or assigns as the one who has been murdered shall have deemed fit to name."

Those three paragraphs, reduced to simple language, meant that if Joyce was convicted of her aunt's murder, the two and one-half million dollars would pass into the possession of Alex Runyan, Doc Patch and Judge Wolfe, to be spent on beautifying Monroe.

Beautifying Monroe! Gillian sank his teeth into the cigar he was smoking and grunted.

THE desk telephone rang. A reporter had just heard that, late in the afternoon, locksmiths had opened the safety deposit box to which Florence Linn and Judge Fillow, as executors of Abner Linn's will, had access. It could not be opened without both keys, and Judge Fillow's key was missing.

The reporter said: "When bank officials counted the money, they found approximately fifty-five thousand dollars missing from Joyce Linn's envelopes. Do you think Judge Fillow took that money?"

Gillian said he knew nothing about it.

"Will you give me some statement to quote?"

"I have nothing to say," Gillian answered, and hung up the receiver. What he might have said was that he was surprised it was so little.

He returned to his study of Abner Linn's will. What a hateful old man he must have been, deliberately to arrange the lives of Joyce and her aunt so that they would inevitably think of murder!

The telephone rang again. He decided to let it ring. He wanted to think, not give his time to answering reporters' foolish questions.

It continued to ring, not in the measured periods of a local call, but in short, sharp jangles. Unmistakably, it was a long distance call.

Gillian picked up the receiver and curtly said, "Hello."

A woman's voice, high and thin with terror, rattled the diaphragm of the receiver.

"Mr. Hazeltine— Mr. Hazeltine—"

Sitting up straight, he snapped: "Yes! What is it?"

"This is Cynera Dell! They're after me! They're breaking into the house! They're smashing in the back door window!"

He cried: "Who?"

Her answer was a scream. He heard a thump, as if the telephone had fallen

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over. Then, from a distance: "Get away! Get out of this house! Get—"

Sounds of scuffling came over the forty-odd miles of copper wire. It sounded as if some one were taking an ax to the furniture. He listened for voices, but heard none. The smashing sounds continued. Then there was a click—and the faint hum of the long distance line.

Gillian crooked his finger over the hook and pulled it down. Had the Green Masks captured Cynera? How, he wanted to know, could he help her? Notify the police! What police? Certainly not the police of Monroe.

He ran downstairs, snatched up his hat and coat from a chair in the hall, and ran out the side door.

Silky's sedan was there, but Silky wasn't in the tonneau. Silky had delegated one of his lieutenants for night work. A hard-looking young man sat beside the driver. Another hard-looking young man smoked a cigarette in the corner of the back seat.

The man at the wheel said: "We're the night crew, Mr. Hazeltine. What's up?"

"Drive out to Monroe," Gillian said. "Step on it!"

The forty-four miles from Gillian's front door to Cynera's front door were accomplished in less than that many minutes. It had occurred to Gillian, during the ride, that that frantic voice might not have been Cynera's; that he was being made the victim of some trick—that a trap was being set. But in this he was mistaken.

ACCOMPANIED by the two hard-faced young men, he approached the back door. The glass had been broken. He was met, when he entered the living room, by a scene of the greatest confusion.

Cynera had evidently struggled against capture with all the ferocity of a trapped lioness. Chairs were overturned. The sky-blue rug was scuffed up at the corners. One of the chintz window curtains was down.

Gillian, taking an inventory of these evidences of violence, was perplexed by finding the telephone—the French doll—standing pertly on its table, with the receiver in place. He picked up the instrument and examined it. His eyes grew narrow and hard.

"You boys," he said quickly, "post yourselves at the front and back doors. I think there'll be reporters here in a minute. Let them in. But if men come wearing green masks, start shooting—and get me out of here."

"Oke," one of the young men said.

The instant they were out of the room, Gillian fell to work putting it in order. He had hardly started on this task when the telephone rang. He answered it. He had guessed correctly. The voice at the other end was Rufe Milne, a tabloid reporter whom Gillian knew very well.

"A phone call just came saying Cynera Dell had been kidnaped. What is there in it?"

"Not a thing," Gillian answered. "Nothing at all. Who called?"

"I don't know. The guy who took the call is on his way up there with a gang of the boys."

"You'll hear plenty of wild rumors," Gillian said. "The truth is, Cynera Dell is spending the evening in Greenfield with my wife."

He hung up and went about the work of straightening up the room with feverish zeal. The chintz curtain gave him the most trouble. It had been yanked off its brass rod, and the fixture holding that end of the rod had been wrenched off, screws and all.

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Gillian was nervously putting back the screws with his fingers when the doorbell rang. He stepped down from the chair. The curtain looked all right. So did the rest of the room. He had removed all evidences of violence excepting that broken window in the kitchen door. Well, the reporters wouldn't see that.

He went to the front door, unlocked and opened it. At least ten men formed a pack of white faces in the light streaming from the doorway.

Gillian said, with surprise: "Why! Good evening, boys! What's up?"

"We just got a call that Cynera Dell had been kidnaped."

"That's queer," Gillian said. "Cynera Dell is spending the evening with my wife. I had my wife on the phone when this doorbell rang. There wasn't anything wrong then, and that wasn't fifteen seconds ago."

"Whoever it was who called," one of the reporters said, "told us that she had put up a terrific fight and the living room was a wreck. She said it was in connection with the murders."

"Who said?"

"Who the devil was it?" the reporter asked generally.

"Some dame," one of them answered. "I took the call. She said if we came up here we'd see for ourselves. Can we take a look?"

"Certainly!" Gillian said. "Come right in."

They followed him into the living room like a pack of hounds on a hot scent.

GILLIAN watched Josh Hammersley, who was among those present, with a certain uneasiness. He knew Josh well. Josh was the best reporter in Greenfield, and was by way of being a smart detective.

Josh poked about and looked the room over with his familiar saturnine air.

"If Cynera is spending the evening with your wife," Josh said, "what are you doing here?"

"I came for some of her things that she wanted," Gillian answered. "I'm trying to persuade her to stay indefinitely. She is a nervous wreck."

The reporters, having satisfied their professional curiosity, were preparing to go.

Gillian said, as he herded them toward the hall. "By the way, boys, what I said this afternoon still goes. Please don't mention this incident. I don't want that old lady to be the victim of sensational publicity. She's a splendid old girl and once she gets a whiff of notoriety, her life is ruined. She can't figure in a scandal like this and keep her job playing a church organ. Don't mention this, will you?"

They promised collectively not to mention it, and filed out. But Josh Hammersley lingered.

When his colleagues were gone, he said, "Gillian, what's back of all this?"

"Just what I said."

"You mean, no one has forcefully entered this house and kidnaped that old lady?"

"Why should they?"

"I'm not asking why they should; I'm asking, did they?"

"Certainly not."

"You wouldn't kid an old fox like me, would you, Gill?"

"Heavens, no," Gillian said. "It wouldn't occur to me. Besides, I couldn't get away with it."

"Can it," Josh growled. He looked about the room again. The chintz curtain seemed to attract him. He went over, looked at it and tugged at it slightly, to straighten it.

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The loose screws came out, the fixture came off, and the curtain came down.

"Can you beat that?" Josh said. "I wonder if all the curtains are hanging by their eyebrows."

"You might pull them down one at a time," Gillian said dryly, "and find out."

Josh went to the kitchen door, which was closed.

"There's nothing out there," Gillian said.

"No?" Josh opened the door and peered into the dark kitchen. Then he grunted, and went out and turned on the kitchen light.

"Funny about that window," he said, when he came back.

Gillian said nothing.

"You forgot the key, huh, and had to break the window?"

"That's right," Gillian said wearily. "If you're quite through snooping, would you mind taking it on the lam?"

"Sure thing—when you give me the lowdown on this."

"I gave you the lowdown."

"I mean, on Cynera's kidnaping."

"She wasn't kidnaped."

"No? Then what's this doing here?"

REACHING down, Josh plucked from under a chair a torn linen handkerchief, trimmed with lace and spattered with blood.

"Oh—that!" Gillian said.

"Yeah—this! Think fast, Gill, think fast! A nosebleed? Ah, no. It must be better than that. And that busted window— You straightened up this room very neatly, all except that curtain and this hanky. Come clean, feller."

"Here's the story," Gillian answered. "Cynera Dell has been kidnaped. Lord knows who did it. If I knew who had done it or where I might look for her, I wouldn't be standing here jabbering with you. It's got me stumped. But it must be kept out of the papers."

"It 'll be kept out."

"Will you run along now?"

"Not so fast, big boy. Why must it be kept out?"

"I can't tell you without betraying my plans."

"Give me a couple of guesses. You're afraid the sheriff's got her—and you're trying to smoke him out into the open. That's guess number one. Right?"

"Yes," Gillian said.

"Point two: Cynera knows something about somebody, and has been holding out on you."

"How did you guess that?" Gillian snapped.

Josh Hammersley gave him a sardonic smile. "Third guess: Cynera is your star witness. She actually *saw* one of those murders committed. She's your ace in the hole. If she goes publicity crazy and has a nervous breakdown, she's so frail she might very well kick off. Have I penetrated your secret?"

"You have," Gillian answered.

"Well, it's safe with me. Give me one more guess."

"Help yourself," Gillian said.

"You know without the shadow of a doubt who the murderer is."

"Yep."

"I'm not as smart as you are," the reporter said. "But I've narrowed it down to three suspects: Jake Ritter, Sheriff Patch, and Judge Wolfe. I've thoroughly checked up on them. Which of them would be least likely to fall under suspicion? Don't answer! I'll tell you! *Judge Wolfe!*"

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Gillian's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing.

"Where," Josh demanded, "was the judge when both murders took place? *He hasn't any alibi!* If one of the three musketeers killed that woman and Judge Fillow, who would be in the safest position to do the killing? Judge Wolfe! Don't be so cagey. You know damned well I'm right. Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"What can I do about it?" Gillian answered.

"That's what I want to know. He's going to try the case. You can't take him off the bench and put him on the witness stand, can you?"

"I wish I could!"

JOSH shook his head sympathetically. "Gillian," he said; "they've got you sewn up in a bag. Your only witnesses who could back up Cynera's testimony are the sheriff who made the arrests, and the county prosecutor who will represent the State. I've talked to Runyan and I've talked to Patch. What Runyan said wasn't for publication. He talked freely. He hates you and he's out to get you. He said that last night when he had you taken out to that shanty, he did it out of motives of kindness."

"How thoughtful of him!"

"Wait a minute, Gill! He said he wanted you safely out of the way. He wanted you to stay out there in perfect security until all this was over. But your escape and the rash things you've said have made him realize that he cannot treat you any longer with kindness. He's got to be rough with you."

"I'm shivering all over," Gillian said.

"Gill, you'd better stop kidding yourself. That man isn't a tenth as smart as you are, but he's dynamite. He's got a strong organization behind him. The Green Masks are a large and powerful outfit."

"And Silky Davis's mob is a strong and powerful outfit, too," Gillian answered. "If Runyan has me bumped off, or if he starts any kind of trouble, he is very apt to have this town blown out from under him. That isn't for publication, either."

"You can't get away with it," Josh argued.

"I'll tell you something else that isn't for publication—or for any ears but yours. Runyan does not realize how fed up this county is with his crookedness. Is the entire population made up of men who wear green masks after dark? Not much! The moment some one starts real, aggressive action against Runyan, you're very apt to see a young revolution."

Josh looked at him with his sardonic smile. "When you were a little boy," he asked, "did you play with nitroglycerine and fulminate of mercury? Will you be home by midnight?"

"Yes."

"I'll give you a buzz. If you haven't found Cynera by then, you can't keep it out of the papers."

"Call me at midnight sharp," Gillian said.

Josh Hammersley went to the doorway; turned, and leisurely inspected the room with his cynical gray eyes.

He drawled: "Not worried, are you, Gillian?"

"Nope."

"Tha's good," the reporter said. "Well, so-long, kiddo."

"So-long, Josh."

Gillian saw him to the door; watched him stride down the walk, pass under a street light; vanish.

He returned to the little parlor to put out the lights. He took out his

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handkerchief and nervously mopped his clammy forehead. Worried? Knowing that, at any moment from now until the trial was over, he might be the recipient of a burst of machine gun bullets? Worried? Not knowing where his star witness was? Worried? Not knowing whether she would take the stand and testify, even if he did find her? Not knowing whether he dared let her take the stand?

But first of all: *Where was Cynera?*

CHAPTER XIX.

NOT BLOOD.

AT midnight, the telephone in Gillian's study rang. Josh Hammersley, back at his desk in the *Times* office, said:

"Hello, Gill. Did you find Cynera?"

"Yep. She's safe and sound."

"The devil you say! What's the lowdown?"

"I can't tell you over the phone. But I've got her, and she's sound asleep in the guest room."

There was a long silence at the other end. Then: "Gillian, you wouldn't kid me, would you? If that old lady isn't at your house, you know this story can't be held up. It's got to go out. It's too hot to hold."

Gillian said irritably: "Why should I try to lie to you? Some day, years from now, maybe, I'll tell you all about it. I'm not going to tell you now any of the steps leading up to her being sound asleep in my guest room. You'll have to take my word for it—and kill the story."

"Okay, Gill—it's as dead as a herring. But God help you if you're lying to me!"

Gillian hung up the receiver and lighted another cigar. At his hand was a freshly uncorked bottle of Black Label Johnny Walker. He poured himself a generous dose, tossed it down, and resumed his pacing.

There was a path worn in the rug—the result of years of what Gillian's Japanese house man, Toro, described, in his fluent English, as "Mr. Hazeltine's perambulatory cogitations."

With the fragrant blue plume from his cigar trailing over his shoulder, Gillian paced forth and back, forth and back; thinking; taking up this plan, discarding it—playing a game of mental solitaire.

He arrived at the conclusion, at the dark hour before dawn, that he had bitten off more than he could chew. He lay down on his bed in the adjoining room without removing his clothes, and as a result of his exhaustion, overslept.

Toro said, when Gillian came downstairs: "The telephone has been ringing since dawn."

"Reporters?"

"Yes, sir. They want to know if it is true that a Miss Cynera Dell is a guest in this house."

"What did you tell them?"

"That she is asleep and that you had left orders that she is not to be disturbed. Shall I continue saying that?"

"Yes. Did any one else call?"

"No, sir."

"No woman?"

"No, sir."

Gillian sat down to his breakfast, but found that he had no appetite. He drank three cups of strong black coffee while he was eagerly scanning the pages of the Greenfield *Times*. There were, he was relieved to find, no references to Cynera.

When he reached his office, an hour later, he found his secretary waiting

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beside his desk, her eyes cold, her lips thin with disapproval. Miss Walsh glanced at her watch and said sharply:

"Good morning, Mr. Hazeltine. You're a half hour late. Your entire schedule for the day is upset."

It was Miss Walsh's private opinion that, without her, her esteemed employer would have fallen miles short of the success he had attained. It was she who snapped the whip over him; kept his mind on serious affairs. She was brisk, efficient, loyal.

SHE was, Gillian perceived, elaborately ignoring the fact that he was up to his ears in another sensational murder case. She made no comments on his absence yesterday, and she made no comments upon the newspaper stories which she certainly must have read.

Miss Walsh did not approve of these sensational cases. They might give thrills to the readers of the tabloid newspapers; they might even accomplish great good, in their way; but they were bad for the morale of the office. The waiting room became a blue fog of smoke from reporters' cigarettes and vile cigars. The telephone girls became nervous wrecks. The office force became hysterical. Mr. Hazeltine was sometimes inaccessible for weeks at a time. Important work was shelved; clients got angry; worthwhile business was lost to other attorneys.

It was characteristic of her to pretend now that trouble clouds were not looming.

Gillian, lighting a fresh cigar, wondered if Miss Walsh ever had dreams of a romantic lover, a honeymoon in Paris—the Luxembourg Gardens in spring.

He said, lazily, "Just what was my schedule for to-day?"

Briskly, she recited it: "You are due at the criminal courts building in two minutes to take care of that habeas corpus writ for Madeline Charcot. You have an eleven o'clock appointment at the district attorney's office to try to settle that Rosetti bootlegging matter out of court. You have a luncheon engagement with Jules Warder at the Bankers Club at twelve forty. Mrs. Flaherty is coming at two thirty with affidavits which give her son a clear alibi in that warehouse robbery. Judge O'Brien is coming at three to discuss the Fairmont Bank receiver order."

Quite as briskly, Gillian attempted to dismiss that important schedule:

"Tell Hastings to attend to the habeas corpus writ for Madeline Charcot. Tell the district attorney I'll see him next week on the bootlegging case."

"Impossible! You've already put him off twice. He said last night that if you don't see him this morning, he will start proceedings."

"Let him start! He's licked and he's bluffing. Cancel my luncheon date with Mr. Warder. Mrs. Flaherty's affidavits must be phony. That son of hers is as crooked as a snake's track. Tell her to get another lawyer. I won't touch the case. Tell Judge O'Brien to let Malevinsky and Detwilder handle the bank receiver order."

Miss Walsh's disapproval was now visible in her complexion and eyes. Her face was rosy.

"Anything else?" Gillian asked.

"This is your wedding anniversary!"

"Great guns! I forgot all about it. Call up the florist and have them send Mrs. Hazeltine some American beauties. Then call up Black's and have them deliver that wrist-watch I selected. Does that clear the decks?"

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"Yes, sir."

"Good! Now trot out and get me copies of all the morning papers and the early editions of the afternoon papers and all the out-of-town papers you can find."

"The out-of-town papers won't be in until eleven."

"Get them for me when they come. And get me Mr. Bannerman on long distance."

"The State attorney general?"

"Yes."

MISS WALSH went to the door, biting her lip. She was furious, but what was the use? Pausing in the doorway, she watched him take off his coat and hang it up; watched him roll up his sleeves. These were the preliminary rumblings of the earthquake which would shake the office, perhaps for weeks to come.

"Anything else?"

"Send for Harry Zarrow. Tell him to come over here on the jump."

Harry Zarrow was the city chemist.

"Yes, Mr. Hazeltine."

When the door closed behind his brisk and bossy secretary, Gillian swiftly cleared his desk. Yesterday's and this morning's mail, which Miss Walsh had placed on his blotter for his consideration, he tossed into a wire basket at the back of his desk. Other items went into various drawers.

Miss Walsh returned with an armful of morning papers before he had finished this task. Gillian arranged them in a pile and went through them systematically. All the morning papers and the early editions of the afternoon papers gave their front pages almost entirely to the Monroe murders; but there was no reference in any of them to Cynera.

Gillian was looking through the last of them when an office boy brought in a bundle of out-of-town papers. And he saw to his relief that no stories concerning Cynera had gone out over the Associated Press or United Press wires.

He was making assurance doubly sure by looking through the pile again when his door opened and the city chemist came in.

Harry Zarrow was a sallow-faced young man, prematurely bald. He wore thick, gold-rimmed spectacles which gave him a scientific air. His demeanor was exceedingly calm.

Gillian said: "Harry, I want you to tell me what this is." And he removed from a coat pocket the torn fragment of lace-trimmed handkerchief which Josh Hammersley had found under a chair in Cynera's parlor.

The city chemist accepted it and said: "What do you mean, what is it?"

"I want you to make a chemical analysis and tell me whether or not those spots are blood."

Harry Zarrow held the handkerchief against the light.

"I don't have to analyze it," he said scornfully. "Any six-year-old, deaf-and-dumb halfwit would know that these spots are some kind of stain—red ink, probably. Blood coagulates, oxidizes, turns black when exposed to the air. These spots are dry and they're still bright red."

"Analyze them, anyway."

"Okay, Mr. Hazeltine."

The telephone rang shortly after the city chemist went out. A girl's voice said, "Ready with Mr. Bannerman." It was followed by a man's gruff, "Hello? Hello?"

"Bannerman?" Gillian said. "This is Gillian Hazeltine."

"Yes"—crisply.

"I wanted to know if I can count

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on your help, if necessary, in this mess which is boiling away in Monroe County."

"You mean that murder case?" the attorney general asked sharply.

"Yes."

"I can't talk about it on the phone. You'd better come up here."

"I'll charter a plane," Gillian said, "and be at your office in an hour and fifteen minutes."

"Very well."

Gillian rang for Miss Walsh. When she appeared, he said: "I'm flying up to see Bannerman. I'll be back by two. Harry Zarrow will phone a report. Please put it on my desk. I'm expecting a call from a woman. Tell her I'll be back by two.

Twenty minutes later, Gillian was seated in the passenger cockpit of a plane, the engine of which was being warmed up. Approximately an hour later, the plane glided into the airport at the State capital. And in ten minutes, Gillian was seated opposite Lucius Bannerman, the State attorney general.

CHAPTER XX.

A WARRANT FOR MURDER.

BANNERMAN had the reputation of being a two-fisted fighter; he looked it. His face was large, square, muscular; his eyes were black; his hair was the same color with a touch of iron at the temples. He reminded Gillian of portraits he had seen of Daniel Webster.

The attorney general went to the heart of the matter without delay.

"I've had two men digging into that situation since yesterday morning," he said. "I'll tell you frankly, Hazeltine; I think you've sawed off more than you can handle. Runyan is a tough egg. He has that county eating out of his hand."

"Before I'm through with him," Gillian answered, "I'm going to have that county biting off his head."

"I doubt it. He's well entrenched. As far as this murder case goes, he has it sewn up. I understand you think that girl he arrested is innocent."

"No doubt about it."

"Then who's the murderer? The several suspects are the girl's cousin, Ned Linn; Steve Carne, the Negro cook; Jake Ritter, the gardener, and Michael Denny, the artist and girl's sweetheart."

"How about either of the three musketeers?"

The black eyes narrowed. "Even if you have positive proof, you can't hang it on them, Hazeltine."

"Look here," Gillian said. "You're not shying away from this thing on account of political reasons, are you?"

"Nope. It simply looks like too tough a nut to crack. How do you expect to crack it?"

"The man who is going to burn for those murders," Gillian answered, "is Sheriff Patch."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Has he an alibi?"

"I've even checked up on that. At the moment the murders were being committed, he was out with some of his Green Masks, beating up that artist."

"In other words," Gillian said, "he can produce men who will admit they are Green Masks and who will swear he was with them while the boy was being beaten up. Right?"

"Yep."

"Then," Gillian said, "what I want from you is a blanket warrant for the arrest of any member of the Green

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Masks who can be identified, on a charge of first degree murder. They beat my friend Tony Lang to death. Reliable witnesses saw the Green Masks drag him out of his house."

The attorney general nodded. "I see. You're going to knock the sheriff's alibi sky high."

"In self defense, I must. He was *not* with the Green Masks while that boy was being beaten. And I intend to block any attempt he may make to use them as alibi witnesses."

Lucius Bannerman pondered. He looked out the window. He lighted a cigarette and blew puffs into the air. He said:

"Hazeltine, yesterday afternoon, I got an urgent phone call requesting me to issue no such warrant."

"From Judge Wolfe?"

"Yes."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I would have to reserve decision until I'd heard your side of the story."

"What's your decision?"

"I'm going to issue the warrant!"

Gillian was unable to restrain a gasp of relief. The attorney general leaned toward him and shook a forefinger at Gillian.

"But I'm warning you. If you go into that court room and start a three-ring circus, I'm coming down on you like a ton of bricks."

Gillian smiled. "You mean you're going to be there?"

"I do. I'm going to sit on the sidelines and keep an eye peeled for perjured witnesses. I'm a wizard at detecting perjury, Hazeltine."

"Did Runyan ask you to attend that trial?" Gillian was curious to know.

"He did. He claims he has an air-tight, bullet-proof case against this Linn girl."

Gillian arose. "Your perjury detector," he said dryly, "is going to work overtime. Will you issue that warrant now?"

"Yes."

WITH the blanket warrant in his possession, Gillian flew back to Greenfield. Reaching his office, he instructed Ben Murdock, one of his assistants, to motor at once to Monroe and to present the warrant to the sheriff in the presence of as many newspaper reporters as he could assemble.

Miss Walsh said: "Harry Zarrow called and told me to tell you those spots are red ink."

"Did a woman phone?"

"No, sir."

Gillian sent her for the latest editions of the afternoon papers. He looked through them carefully for references of any kind to Cynera; found nothing.

At a little after three, Josh Hammersley called and said: "Gillian, there is something mighty phony about this Cynera business. I've called your house repeatedly. They won't let me talk to her."

"I've given orders that she is not to be disturbed," Gillian said. "She's in a very nervous state."

"Yeah? Now let me tell one. If I don't talk to her by the time we go to press to-night, it's going to be all over to-morrow's paper. There are no new developments in the case, and Cynera's disappearance, or kidnaping, is white hot."

"I'll let you know later this evening," Gillian said.

"You mean, you'll let me talk to her in person."

"I'm sure it can be arranged," Gillian said.

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Josh hung up, Gillian went to the window and looked out over the broad reaches of the Sangamo River. He was standing there when the phone rang again.

He picked up the receiver. "Mr. Hazeltine," a woman's agitated voice said, "can you come to me at once?"

"Cynera!" he cried.

"Yes! I'm in a phone booth in the back of a drug store on the corner of Chestnut and Warren. Come quick! I'm in great danger! I don't dare leave this phone booth! Hurry!"

Gillian reached the drug store on the corner of Chestnut and Warren approximately sixty seconds ahead of a veritable avalanche of newspaper reporters. But that one minute saved the day for Gillian. Cynera, he was to learn, had made the slight mistake of telephoning him first, the newspaper offices afterward.

He found her, white-faced and bright-eyed, in the phone booth. Taking her arm, he led her down the length of the store. She was so weak she could hardly walk.

The large-eyed young man behind the counter called: "Hey! What's going on here? She's been hiding in that booth for half an hour!"

Gillian said gently: "She was shopping and she was taken ill. She telephoned me to come for her." That would certainly satisfy the reporters.

GILLIAN conducted Cynera to the black sedan at the curb and told the driver to take her to his house as rapidly as possible.

With Cynera's bright, birdlike eyes upon Gillian, they started off.

"Were you worried?" she asked.

"Frightfully," Gillian answered.

"It was horrible," Cynera said. "They locked me in a vile black room. I escaped by rushing into the hall and climbing out a window. I hurried to the first telephone and called you."

"It must have been a dreadful experience," Gillian said. "Who did all this?"

"If I only knew!"

"Not the Green Masks?"

"I don't know, young man. They tied my hands and feet with rope, and they gagged me with a dirty old rag. We drove and drove. I think I must have fainted. When I came to I was in this vile dark room in a wretched old house on the river front."

"Cynera," Gillian said; "I turned that torn fragment of your handkerchief over to a chemist."

She looked at him suspiciously, then sighed and said, "You win."

"Where," Gillian asked, "have you really been?"

"In a cheap hotel on Warren Street. Oh, I might as well tell you everything. I might have known I couldn't outsmart you. First, I made my parlor look as though there'd been a struggle. Then I called you and the reporters. Then I got into my flivver and drove to town and registered at this cheap hotel. I went out this morning, expecting to see my name and picture on all the front pages. There wasn't a single item. I even bought the out-of-town papers."

Gillian said: "Cynera, I knew you had done it for the publicity. You can't get publicity that way. The only possible way you can get publicity is to take the witness stand when I want you to and tell me just what you heard and saw from the kitchen doorway when Judge Fillow was being murdered."

Her birdlike eyes did not stray from his.

"Would you have the courage,"

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Gillian went on, "to take the stand and testify, in spite of the fact that the sheriff knows you blackmailed Judge Fillow?"

Cynera answered sharply: "I would! Yes, I would!"

And Gillian knew then, and not until then, that he had won this battle with Cynera.

"Did you hear the sheriff's voice?"

"I did!"

"Would you swear to that on oath?"

"I would and will!"

"And what did you see from the kitchen door—if anything?"

Cynera's answer came in a scared whisper: "The murder!"

The black sedan swung into the Hazeltine driveway; stopped under the porte-cochère.

Gillian said: "The reporters will be here at any moment. You have nothing to say except that you have been here since ten o'clock last night."

A few minutes later, Gillian and Cynera received the reporters—upward of twenty of them—in the Hazeltine living room. It took Gillian a half hour to convince them that these various wild telephone calls purporting to be from Cynera were really the work of some mischief maker. There was no story at all in Cynera. She was simply the house guest of Mr. and Mrs. Hazeltine.

The reporters were preparing to leave when Toro came in to announce that Mr. Hazeltine was urgently wanted on the telephone.

IT was, Toro said, Mr. Murdock. He was telephoning from Monroe. Gillian told the reporters to wait. His first guess was that the sheriff had made trouble when Ben presented him with the warrant.

He said sharply, "Hello, Ben. What's up?"

Panting with excitement, stuttering, Ben Murdock said: "Mr. Hazeltine, th-they just broke into jail and k-killed that Negro!"

"Not Steve Carne!" Gillian gasped.

"Y-yes, sir!"

"Who did it?"

"A gang. A rumor got going around that Carne was really the murderer, and there's been a big mob milling around the jail for the past hour. God knows who started the rumor, but the crowd suddenly went wild. Before anybody could stop them, they broke into the jail and tried to get Carne out. They were going to lynch him. But they couldn't get into his cell, and the warden had the keys hidden, so they shot him through the bars. They say he got off into a corner and prayed for mercy. And they poured revolver bullets into him."

"Any arrests?"

"No, sir. The sheriff swore in a lot of deputies and scattered the crowds. Mr. Runyan tried to get the Governor to send a company of State militia down, but the Governor's in Washington and can't be reached, and the Lieutenant Governor refuses to act."

"Is there much excitement there?"

"No, sir. Things have quieted down again. Anything I can do?"

"Yes. Come back here before you get shot."

Gillian returned, white-faced, to the living room. He briefly told the reporters what had happened.

A few minutes after they had gone, Josh Hammersley phoned. He had just heard about the killing of Carne and wanted to know what it would mean.

"You know damned well," Gillian answered, "what it's going to mean.

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The lid is just about ready to blow off up there."

"And you mean that our boy friend, Mr. Runyan, is sitting on the lid?"

"Certainly! It's his lid."

"Go ahead, Gillian. What's going to happen? Let's have some gory details."

"The trial of Joyce Linn," Gillian replied, "will be keyed to the fine rousing pitch of mob hysteria."

"What's the pay-off going to be?"

"Alex Runyan will sail to the deuce on the lid!"

"H'm. I doubt it, Gillian. I still maintain you've never got over your boyish habit of playing with nitroglycerine and fulminate of mercury. The explosion is much more apt to send you sky-high than it is Runyan. Where is Cynera?"

"Just a moment. I'll call her." Gillian went into the living room and said to the old lady: "There's a reporter on the phone who is doubtful of my statement that you've been here since last night."

"What shall I tell him, young man?"

"That you are going to Lake Largo with my wife until the trial is over."

But Cynera did not go to Lake Largo with Mrs. Hazeltine. Once again, that spry old lady was to slip out of his hands.

CHAPTER XXI.

PERJURY!

THE tension in Monroe in the days which saw the beginning of Joyce Linn's trial for the murder of Florence Linn was such that it seemed, at times, as if a whisper, a pin-drop a lifted eyebrow might snap it.

In spite of the best that the police could do, mobs swarmed through the streets and congregated thickly about the courthouse and jail. They poured into town in every manner of conveyance, from slim and elegant roadsters to hay wagons. One man covered the ten miles from his farm to Monroe in a caterpillar tractor.

It was, however, an orderly mob. Men collected in knots on street corners and argued the case hotly, but there were no serious disorders. They seemed to have been drawn to Monroe by curiosity alone, yet Gillian Hazeltine had learned that most of these men carried revolvers.

They were not bent on trouble, but they were prepared to meet trouble more than halfway. All his efforts to find out just what the mob attitude was were unsuccessful.

As the court room was small, it was necessary to issue tickets to the very limited number who could be accommodated.

Taking his place at the counsel table, on that first day, Gillian realized that the fight ahead of him was, in one respect at least, quite unique: never had he entered a court room with the odds so overwhelmingly against him. He knew that Alex Runyan had left no stone unturned in the preparation of his case, and he had long ago learned that Runyan was a powerful and dangerous antagonist.

Gillian, going to the counsel table that morning, looked pale and haggard as he always did at the outset of a trial. Runyan, on the other hand, seemed fairly to bristle with power and confidence. His face was flushed. His eyes glowed and sparkled.

At Gillian's table sat Ben Murdock and Joyce Linn. She was dressed severely in black. The suffering she had undergone had made a definite change

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in the young woman. She was pale. Her black garments accentuated her pallor and gave her a fragile, ethereal look. She was much thinner, and her complexion, in the cold, dusty north light, looked transparent. In her white face, her eyes burned with a strange, almost startling luminosity.

The keynote of this trial, as Gillian had prophesied some weeks before, would be the fine rousing pitch of mob hysteria, and certainly some such feeling was present in that room when the impanelling of the jury began.

Alex Runyan was antagonistic from the very outset. He went about hand-picking his jury with the steam-roller aggressiveness that was so characteristic of everything he did.

Gillian exhausted his last peremptory challenge on Juror Number Nine. This occurred shortly after noon recess on the second day. Less than an hour later, the trial was under way.

A clerk read the charge in a crackling, thin voice which occasionally buckled with nervousness.

"To the Superior Court for Monroe County comes Alex Runyan, attorney for the State in said county, and on his oath of office complaint and information makes that on the 6th day of May Joyce Linn, of the town of Monroe, in the said county—"

The voice crackled and broke; went on and on. The court room hummed with low whispers.

The clerk concluded the charge which placed Joyce Linn on trial for her life.

GILLIAN crisply pleaded not guilty for his client and Alex Runyan began his address to the jury.

"I will endeavor to prove to you, gentlemen, beyond the peradventure of a doubt...

"My duty here is to prosecute the person whom I consider, after the most thorough investigation and mature thought, to be guilty of the murder of Florence Linn; it is not my duty to persecute an innocent victim of careless or mendacious testimony...

"And I want you, gentlemen of the jury, to attend the giving of testimony with the utmost care and concentration...

"Deep down in my heart, I am convinced that this white-faced girl is a deliberate murderer, and I shall, step by step, endeavor to transfer this conviction from my heart to yours...

"And I shall endeavor to show you, gentlemen of the jury, that this guilty-faced girl did with deliberation and forethought fiendishly slay this poor woman who was, for many years, a mother to her..."

On and on and on. That address planted the seeds which the county prosecutor would, with witnesses, endeavor to make grow and blossom.

Judge Wolfe gazed benignly upon Alex Runyan through his black horn-rimmed glasses; he seemed to nod slightly when certain vital points were stressed.

Or, as Josh Hammersley said to Gillian that evening: "The judge was checking up Runyan, making sure he had all the stitches in the bag. You know yourself that they cooked up this prosecution. If you think I'm cock-eyed, let's see how far you get with your objections!"

Josh went on: "Gillian, I have been making some inquiries among the crowd. I've talked to fifty men. And I'll tell you what their attitude is. They're just waiting for somebody to start something. The minute it starts, the mob is waiting to finish it.

"What do I mean? They feel that

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Runyan has buffaloed them for years. But it's up to you to prove that to their satisfaction. Yet they are suspicious of you. Runyan and his agents have taken pains to poison their minds against you. They have been told that you are a crooked lawyer; that you have bought judges and bribed juries and used perjured witnesses. They want this trial to be clean. The first false move you make, they're apt to take you out and string you to a tree. I'm not exaggerating."

"How about Runyan?" Gillian asked.

"The same feeling applies. If he has been tricking them, if all the nasty, rotten stories they've been hearing about him are true, they have an idea they'll know about it during this trial."

"In other words," Gillian said, "if I show him up for what he really is, this mob will try to lynch him?"

"Exactly that."

Gillian said grimly: "Do you think I will hesitate to show that crook up? If he is lynched, it will not be on my conscience. He is so powerful, so ruthless, that any method at all to show him up would be justified. Doesn't it almost amount to this: If he wins this trial, I am apt to get lynched; and if I win, he is apt to get lynched?"

"That," Josh said, "is just how it stands, according to the way I look at it. If Runyan wins this case, you'd better have Silky's mob well-equipped with tear-bombs!"

THE first witness placed on the stand by Alex Runyan was Dr. Donovan, the coroner. Link Donovan was a red-haired man with yellowish-blue eyes and a yellowish cast of countenance, somewhat accentuated by a carrot-colored brush mustache and liver spots.

He testified that he had not inspected the body of Florence Linn until it had been removed from the actual scene of the murder to the living room of the Linn house.

"The body was lying on a couch in the living room under a sheet when I was called in," Dr. Donovan testified.

"What conclusions did you reach as to the manner in which Miss Linn met her death?"

"She was struck on the head with some blunt instrument, then strangled."

"Would you say that the blow on the head would have killed her without the strangling?"

"Not necessarily. It might have rendered her unconscious for the time being."

"Did you examine the skull?"

"I did."

"Was it fractured?"

"No, sir. There were evidences of concussion, but the bone was not fractured."

"Yet you believe, in your professional opinion, that the blow Miss Linn received was sufficient to stun her?"

"That is my opinion."

"You believe that, while she was in this stunned or temporarily unconscious condition, the murderer then strangled her?"

"Yes."

"In other words, whoever killed Miss Linn might well have been a person of much inferior physical strength?"

"That was the conclusion I drew."

Alex Runyan now asked a series of questions along these same lines, endeavoring to show the jury that the murderer of Florence Linn must have been a physically weak person, or that blow on the head would not have been resorted to. He dismissed the grape-

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vine which had been used for the strangling with a few brief questions. It was Dr. Donovan's opinion that the deceased had died as a result of having her breath cut off while in a stunned condition.

Runyan now explained to the jury that, for the purposes of legal record, it was necessary to prove with adequate testimony that the woman killed had, in reality, been Florence Linn.

"Did you know Florence Linn well?"

"I had known her for years."

"Was there any question in your mind that the body you examined was that of Florence Linn?"

"No, sir; there was no question."

"That will be all."

Gillian took the witness for cross-examination.

"Dr. Donovan, will you please tell me just where this bruise was?"

"It was on the back of the head, slightly above a line drawn between the upper rim of the two ears."

"Would you say, from the position of this bruise, that the blow had been struck by a woman shorter than Miss Florence Linn?"

"That would be impossible to say," the coroner answered. "The particular angle of the club, or whatever implement was used, would have depended on how far from Miss Linn her assailant stood. It might have been a long club. It is impossible to say."

"But it is your honest conclusion that the murderer must have been a person of inferior strength to Florence Linn?"

"That is only my supposition, based on the fact that Florence Linn was struck before she was strangled. I assumed that if the murderer had been a powerful person, the blow would not have been resorted to. I mean, a powerful person would have strangled her without bothering to knock her over the head."

GILLIAN addressed the bench. "Your honor, I respectfully submit that all of Dr. Donovan's assumptions and suppositions be stricken from the record. I myself would advance the supposition that the killer of Florence Linn would have struck her on the head to stifle her cries."

Judge Wolfe refused to act on Gillian's suggestion. He added: "You had better save these arguments for your perorations."

It was an unimportant straw in a feeble wind, but it did show the direction of the wind. Judge Wolfe would overrule, on any pretext, every objection which Gillian raised.

The State's next witness was James Fogarty, the tall, lanky police officer whom Gillian had seen in the Linn house on the night of the murders. His testimony was unimportant, being merely corroborative of what the coroner had said.

Under Runyan's questioning, he stated that he had accompanied Runyan into the back yard and to the grape arbor; had seen the body of Florence Linn lying there beside her dead dog, and had helped carry her into the living room.

"Did you see a length of grapevine twisted about her neck?"

"Yes, sir. Another piece of the vine was around the dog's neck."

The county prosecutor pursued this questioning a little further, then gave the witness to Gillian.

Gillian shot at him: "Weren't you in Florence Linn's house when a policeman named James Thorpe brought in a tramp he had picked up down by the switchyard?"

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The policeman's eyes were narrow now. "Yes, sir."

"Why was that tramp arrested and brought to the house?"

"Because he was a vagrant. We were told to bring in all suspicious characters that night."

"Wasn't he arrested because a valuable piece of jewelry was found in his possession?"

The policeman's reaction to that was mild surprise. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Do you mean to tell me you did not see the diamond necklace which was found in that man's possession?"

The witness looked at him blankly. He repeated: "I don't know what you are talking about."

"That will be all."

As far as Gillian was concerned, it was plenty. He knew that Runyan had driven a bargain with Ned Linn. He knew that Ned Linn would take the stand as an important witness—the price of freeing him from the charge of stealing that diamond necklace from Florence Linn's body!

His guess was upheld an instant later.

Ned Linn was the State's next witness.

A CONSIDERABLE change was noticeable in Joyce Linn's cousin since the two previous times Gillian had seen the man. The first time, when he was brought to the house with the diamond necklace, he had been a human derelict—shivering with cold, hunger and terror—a bum.

Now he wore a neat blue serge suit, a clean white shirt, a blue, neat tie, freshly polished brown oxfords. He was shaved; he appeared well fed, almost prosperous. And there was a look of resolution in his ratty eyes when he took the stand.

He kept his eyes on Runyan's face.

Runyan asked him what his relationship was to the accused.

"I am Joyce Linn's cousin."

"So that Florence Linn was your aunt?"

"Yes, sir."

"On the night of May sixth, where were you?"

"In this town."

"What were you doing here?"

"I was on my way from Oregon, where my father's apple orchard is located, to New York City, where some friends were going to get me a position."

"What time did you reach Monroe?"

"At about half past ten."

"Were you on a passenger train?"

"No, sir; a freight train."

"That's strange. You don't look like a tramp. Why were you riding on a freight train?"

"To save my money until I found a position."

"Very well. You dropped off, or got off, the freight train at about ten thirty. Then what did you do?"

The witness hesitated.

Runyan prompted him: "Well, did you find your aunt at home?"

"No, sir. I saw her being murdered."

A murmuring in the court room became so audible that a bailiff glared and banged with his gavel for order. Gillian sank down in his chair with his chin in his hand. Runyan had fired his opening broadside. Not content with a circumstantial case against Joyce, he would weave a net of perjured eye-witness testimony about her. And what was Gillian going to do about it?

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

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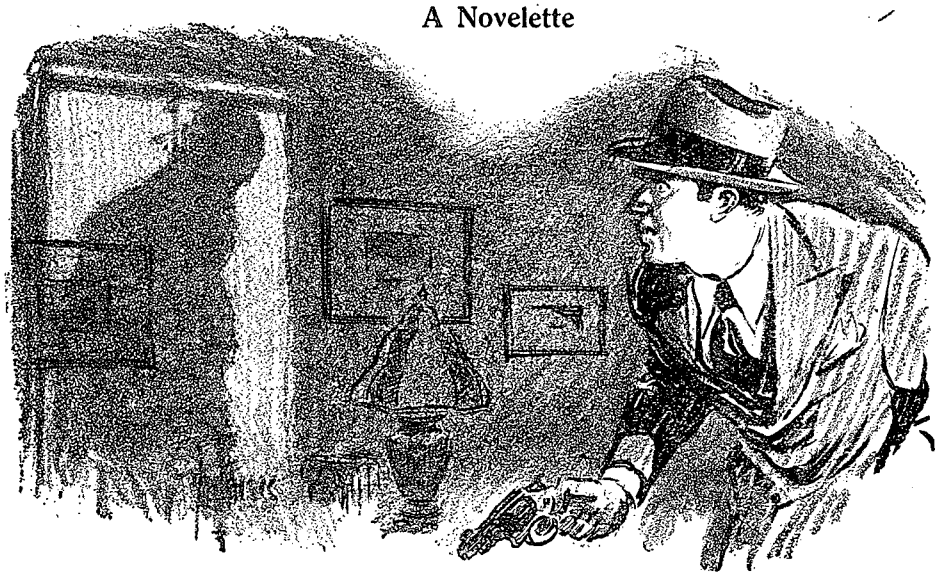
DO YOU READ DETECTIVE FICTION?

The Garroters of Ghost Cove

A Novelette



He leaped back and whipped the revolver from his pocket

Bob Riley Put a Gun in His Pocket, and Was Ready for Anything—But Hardly for What He Found in Room 404

By T. T. Flynn

CHAPTER I

The Hanging Man

BOB RILEY paused before the door of Apartment 404, The Belton Arms. From his pocket he drew a small bunch of skeleton keys, selected one, deftly inserted it in the lock. The door opened and Bob stepped inside, closing it behind him. Then he pressed the light button.

The next instant he leaped back, whipping a gun from his pocket. In a doorway of the entrance hall a man confronted him. A man silent, inarticulate, horrible. His arms hung limply at his sides and his legs dangled inertly.

He was held upright by a thin silken cord that encircled his neck, passed over a curtain rod at the top of the doorway and returned.

A man strangled to death—the first victim of the garroters! Finish this thrilling novelette in the July 25 issue of DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY.

Read DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY—10c

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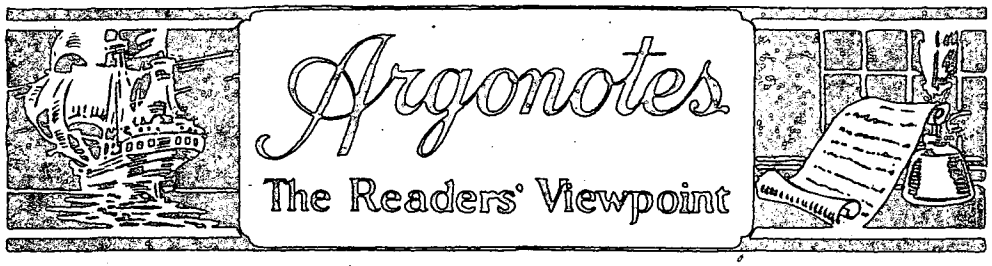

SPEAKING of good, hot disputes, it's easy to start them over W. Wirt:

Macon, Ga.

Why don't these kickers lay off W. Wirt? Do the fellows that criticize the number of killings in his Chinese stories ever pick up the newspapers? I've heard somewhere that fiction is supposed to be true to life. Mr. Wirt's writings rank with Loring Brent's, and George F. Worts's for Jack London-like vividness of presentation and simple, readable style, so easy that it's a pleasure rather than a strain to read him, a distinction not found in many. Mr. Wirt creates characters one has trouble in forgetting, and his *Jimmie Cordie, Boston Bean,* etc., seem more vivid to me than many folks I know.

C. KESSLER.

Cincinnati, Ohio.

Remedy for sufferers of insomnia:

(a) Select a nice, soft easy chair and make yourself comfortable.

(b) Pick up a copy of ARGOSY and turn to a story by W. Wirt.

(c) Begin to read.

(d) If you are not asleep at the middle of the third chapter, consult your physician.

F. E. WILLIAMS.

New York, N. Y.

Best stories, in my opinion, during recent weeks were as follows: "Flames of Feud," by Frank Richardson Pierce; "Green Goddess," by J. U. Giesy and Junius B. Smith; "Bell of the Lutine," by Jack Allman; "Guns of the American," by W. Wirt; "The Hothouse World," by Fred MacIsaac; "Tiger of Pnom Kha," by F. V. W. Mason; "Battle of the Silent Men," by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson; "Mob," by Robert Carse, and "Jades and Afghans," by W. Wirt. The best characters were *Jimmie Cordie* and his fellow adventurers. Let us have some more *Gillian Hazeltine* stories. I think "The Diamond Bullet" was excellent. *Bill* and *Jim,* drifters, and *Captain Norcross* are fine.

JOHN DE SALLE GOUIN.

New York, N. Y.

I've been reading the ARGOSY for over a year now and I'd like to say that it's the best hours of reading that any one can get for a dime. The stories are all great except for the *Jimmie Cordie* stories which Wirt writes. The serials are the best part of the magazine. A few of the real good ones which I've read are "Balata," "Flames of Feud, "The Death Ride," "The Hothouse World," and "Sinister House." How about some more *Gillian Hazeltine* stories? They're real good. Before closing I'd like to say again that I think that the ARGOSY is a d——n good magazine.

JULES TESLER.

A KNOCK for H. Bedford-Jones:

Jackson, Mich.

I've been a reader of ARGOSY for twelve years, and I think it's time to make a kick.

Most of your stories are good—though I'd like to see more Westerns (but not by Grinstead)—especially those by MacIsaac and Leinster. I can't for the life of me understand, though, why you keep publishing those stories by Bedford-Jones—unless it is because of his name. Years ago the first story of his I read concerned a gold cargo in the Orient, with the supercargo fighting a bunch of Malays or Chinks for it. He's used that same plot nearly fifty times since, at least a dozen times in ARGOSY. For the sake of long-suffering readers, please get some new writers. Lord knows you need new blood on your contents pages! To repeat, I'd like to see more of the good old Western stories, and less of the foreign or sea tales.

W. W. WALLACE.

AN "ARGOSY addict" diagnoses his case:

Wilmington, Calif.

I know darn well this will never get into "Argonotes," but I will express my appreciation, anyhow. I am not such an "old-timer" as a lot of your readers, for I haven't lived long enough to claim to be an ARGOSY "addict" of long standing. Somewhere away back in my short twenty-three years of mundane existence I ran across a magazine that made me contract the reading habit in a virulent form. It was the *Argosy-Allstory,* and the story was either "The Blind Spot" or "The Girl in the Golden Atom." Other stories of about the same time added fuel to the fire, "Into the Infinite" being one.

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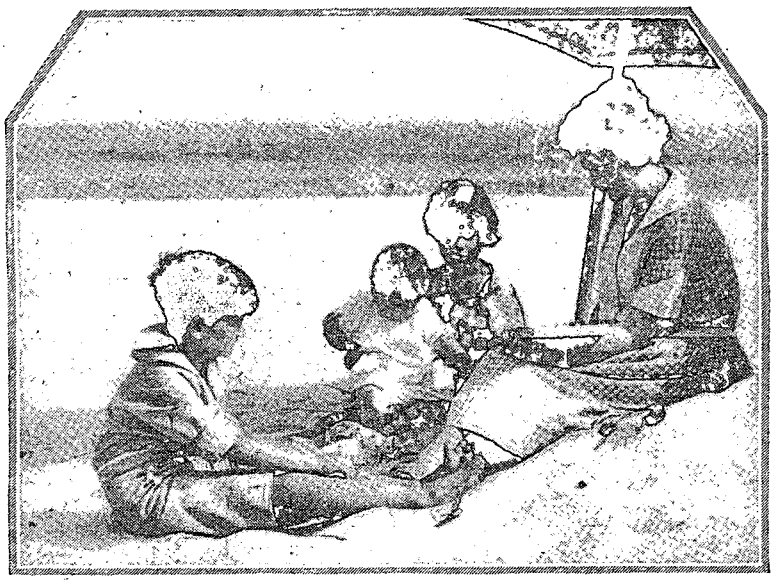

"In February of this year (1924) my third baby was born. Three months later found me with constipation, headaches and just dragging around – and *three small children.* I decided something had to be done. I started taking Fleischmann's Yeast, a cake morning and night. In a few weeks I was able to stop the use of cathartics; headaches and backaches were gone; and I had plenty of energy. I felt like a different woman."

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Eat two or three cakes a day before meals: on crackers—in fruit juices or milk—or just plain. *For constipation especially, dissolve one cake in hot water (not scalding) night and morning.*

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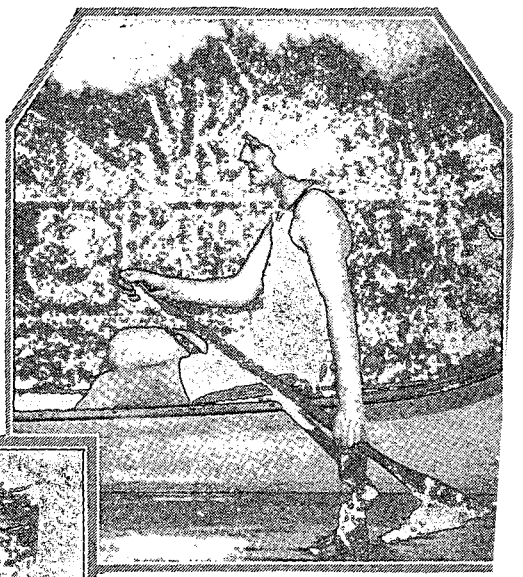

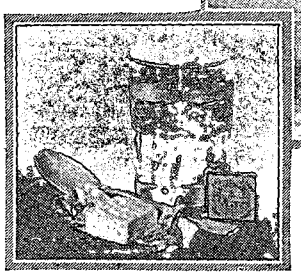

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We recommend Othine Complexion Soap for use with Othine, also as a shampoo—it's wonderful for bobbed hair—25c a cake at all drug or department stores or by mail. Othine Laboratories, Inc., Buffalo, N. Y.

Statement of the ownership, management, etc., of THE ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY, published weekly at New York, N. Y., for April 1st, 1925. Required by the Act of Congress of August 24th, 1912.

State of NEW YORK } s.s.
County of NEW YORK }

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared WM. T. DEWART, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publishers of THE ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24th, 1912, embodied in section 443, Postal Laws and Regulations. To wit:

That the names and addresses of the Publisher, Editor, Managing Editor, and Business Manager are:

Publishers—The Frank A. Munsey Company, 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Editor—Matthew White, Jr., 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Managing Editor—Robert H. Davis, 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Business Manager—Wm. T. Dewart, 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

That the Owners are: (If a corporation give its name and the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of the total amount of stock.)

The Frank A. Munsey Company, 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Frank A. Munsey, 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders, owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are:—

There are no bonds, mortgages, or other securities against The Frank A. Munsey Company.

That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

WM. T. DEWART, Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of April, 1925.

{SEAL}

A. V. KASS, Notary Public.
New York County, No. 34.
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Term expires March 30th, 1926.

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